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SoSe 2005  
Tense Shifts in Narrative  
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## Tense Shifts in Narrative

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## 1 Introduction

In this paper, I analyze tense shifts in conversational narrative.

The first, rather theoretical section of this paper will be about the conversational historical present (CHP). Afterwards, I will present a few theories about tense shifts from CHP to the past tense and vice versa. These theories will be examined by analyzing some narratives. Eventually, I will present and test a theory on tense shifts in narrative dialogue introducers.

All narratives I have used are taken from the Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English (SCoSE). I basically follow Labov and Wolfson in my use of terminology. I will use Nessa Wolfson's dissertation, which was published in 1982, to present her ideas although she had already expressed some of her ideas in essays that had been published in the years before. This is why it is possible that Schiffrin (1981) reflects some of Wolfson's (1982) ideas.

## 2 The Conversational Historical Present

The historical present (HP) is the use of the present tense to refer to the past. The CHP is distinguished from other uses of the present tense by mainly three features. Firstly, the CHP is restricted to conversational narrative. Secondly, the CHP can always be replaced by the past tense without any change in reference. Thirdly, the CHP is never found in all predicates where it could have been used. This means that the use of the CHP is always selective. The second property of the CHP - the fact that it can be substituted by the past tense - is essential for discriminating between the CHP and other uses of the present tense, which occur in narrative as well. The reference time of verbs which can be classified as CHP is always the past, it is the time at which the events took place. In narrative, there are occurrences of present tense which do not refer to the time of the events. These uses are not examples of the CHP and are consequently not the topic of my paper (Wolfson 1982: 3-7).

According to Schiffrin (1981: 51), the CHP occurs almost exclusively in narrative and restricted clauses in the complicating action section of a narrative. This is logical as there is a clear temporal order established in complicating action clauses and, thus, tense is freed from its main function of providing a reference time.<sup>1</sup>

As the CHP is never used in all cases where it could be used, Wolfson (1982: 3) concludes that it is not the CHP itself which is significant for conversational narrative, but the shifts between the past tense and the CHP. This contradicts the traditional view of the CHP as a past more vivid. Her rejection of this traditional view is further supported by the fact that the English present tense is actually timeless (Twaddell 1960: 5). Wolfson's (1982: 34) results that the most important events are often given in the past tense allow us to finally discard the hypothesis that the CHP is nothing more than a past more vivid. She points out that it is not the CHP itself, but the "switching back and forth between the past tense and CHP ... which is the significant feature" (Wolfson 1982: 35).

### 3 Tense shifts

The most typical pattern for narratives containing CHP is that the complicating action begins in the past tense, switches to CHP, switches a few more times back and forth and ends in the past tense. Furthermore, rapid alternation between the two tenses is not typical, verbs in the same tense tend to cluster together (Schiffrin 1981: 51-52).

Schiffrin (1981: 52) and Wolfson (1982: 36) agree on the theory that tense switching basically serves to separate events.

### 3.1 Tense shifts from CHP to past tense

Wolfson's hypothesis that tense shifts serve to "partition off important events or points in the story from each other" (Wolfson 1982: 36) is supported by Schiffrin's (1981: 55) findings that temporal conjunctions - which function to separate events from one another - favour tense switches. The two researchers do not attribute any further functions to switches from the CHP to the past tense.

The complicating action in the story *Finger Caught* starts in the past tense: "I went to the orthodontist one time" (1.5). The first occurrence of CHP is in line 20. There are a few more forms of the CHP before tense switches back to the past tense: "[A]nd I didn't want anybody to see it of course" (1.26). There is not a new event represented in this statement, as should be expected according to the theory by Schiffrin and Wolfson. This utterance can rather be seen as an example of the evaluative function of narrative as defined by Labov (1967: 37). The line reveals the attitude of the narrator towards the narrative. The negative ("didn't want") is a comparator, that means a feature which is typically used in evaluative passages of a narrative (Labov 1972: 381). Nevertheless, there is a shift of focus contained in this utterance. The tense shift does not coincide with a new event, but with the revelation of an attitude. Tense switches back to the CHP in line 27, and

remains in the CHP for a few more clauses before it switches back to the past tense again: "[U]h came up" (1.39). In grammatical terms, the subject belonging to this predicate can be found a few intonation units before: it is "the lady" (1.35). Thus, although the last example of CHP is in line 32 ("I'm sitting") and the first form of past tense is in line 39, the shift can be regarded as taking place between line 34 and 35. This is exactly the place where the speaker's attempts to solve her problem on her own eventually fail. Somebody else realizes that she does not get her finger out any more and helps her. In this case, the tense shift from CHP to past tense supports separating the events: her attempts to hide her mischief are almost entirely narrated in the CHP, and the events in which the dental hygienist is involved are almost completely told in the past tense. In this story, one example of tense shifts from CHP to past tense does, and one does not support the theory by Schiffrin and Wolfson.

The orientation section of the story *Killing Brother* is told in the past tense. The complicating action is mainly told in the CHP. The only instance of past tense within the complicating action is in line 30: "I said". There are two possible explanations for this feature, of which I am going to analyze one in this section and the other one in section 3.3. The tense shift from CHP "I go running up the stairs"

(1.29) to the past tense can indeed be regarded as separating events. Up to line 29, the events that took place between the narrator and his brother are being reported. In line 30, the narrator reports speech to his mother - a person who did not appear in the story before. It is the point at which the narrator's mother is being informed about the narrator supposing having killed his brother. This (speech) event is clearly separated from the (physical) events that took place before. Furthermore, this passage contains embedding of evaluation: the speaker quotes himself as addressing somebody else (Labov 1972: 372). The utterance in line 30/31 can be considered to be the main point of the story.

To sum up, the tense shift from CHP to past tense in line 30 does on the one hand follow Schifffrin's / Wolfson's theory that this direction of tense shifts serves to partition off events. But, on the other hand, the passage in the past tense is highly evaluative. Consequently, it is likely that, in this case, the tense shift from CHP to past tense does not only separate events, but that it supports the evaluation as well.

In the story *Basketball*, there is one shift from CHP to past tense. The utterances in the lines 24 to 27 are reported in the CHP. The lines 28 and 29 contain some audience response to the evaluating statement "and so that's

even humiliating at that" (l.27). The complicating action continues in line 30: "[S]o I went I wnet (sic) in". This is the place in which tense shifts back from CHP to past tense again. Whereas she reports a dialogue and her feelings in the lines 24 to 27, Audrey depicts physical events from line 30 onwards. The tense shift supports this shift of focus. In this case, the tense switch supports the separating of the events, but it does not serve any other purpose.

Three out of four switches from CHP to past tense I have analyzed follow Schifffrin's and Wolfson's hypothesis that tense shifts from CHP to past tense serve to partition off events. But my data show that switches from CHP to past tense can serve other purposes as well, of which the purpose of evaluation seems to be the most important.

### 3.2 Shifts from past tense to CHP

The foregoing section of this paper has shown that Wolfson's theory about tense shifts from CHP to past tense separating events is correct, although there are cases in which the shift serves further purposes. She attributes the very same function of partitioning off events to the tense shift from past tense to CHP. Just as in the other direction of tense shifts, she does not attribute any further functions to this

direction of tense shifts (Wolfson 1982: 36). In her theory, the direction of tense shift does not matter.

Unlike Wolfson, Schiffrin (1981: 56) thinks that "it is only when tense switches from HP to P that it separates events in the narrative". This means that the direction of tense shift does matter, according to Schiffrin. She thinks that the CHP is an evaluation device. Her hypothesis is based on the observation that the CHP and progressive forms, which are features of evaluation as well, often coincide. She considers the tense shifts from past tense to CHP to be a device which supports the evaluative character of the CHP (Schiffrin 1981: 59).

In the story *Dead Cat*, the first example of CHP is in line 30: "[S]o he takes the cat". In this case, there is no progressive form coinciding with the CHP. Furthermore, this clause does not contain any features of evaluation at all. Consequently, it is highly improbable that the switch from past tense to CHP functions as an evaluation device in this case. Wolfson's theory about tense switches separating events is much more appropriate for this example. The tense shift occurs at the point of the story at which the speaker takes the dead cat. This action is the basis for the rest of the story and could not be left out of the story performance at all.

Unlike in the story *Dead Cat*, the first occurrence of the CHP in the story *Back Door* is in an evaluative passage: "[A]nd so we're there pissing" (1.25). This example of CHP does not only coincide with the progressive form, which is a device for internal evaluation. It is also the first intonation unit in an evaluative part of the narrative, as the lines 27/28 contain external evaluation. As the first example of CHP in this story coincides with a feature of internal evaluation and as it is used at the beginning of a whole evaluative section, it is likely that the tense shift from past tense to CHP supports the evaluation as well.

There are two examples of tense shifts from past tense to CHP in the story *Finger Caught*. The first shift is from "and I put my finger in there" (1.19) to "and all of a sudden I'm like" (1.20). Line 20 does not contain a progressive form. But "all of a sudden" is an evaluative device, namely an intensifier. The intensifier provides the evaluative force of this utterance in the first place. The tense shift supports the evaluative force. The other switch from past tense to CHP takes place from line 26 to line 27. Both the past tense clause and the utterance containing the CHP display evaluative devices:

26 and I didn't want anybody to see it of course  
 27 so I'm kind of like trying to avoid being seen y'know

The past tense clause in line 26 contains a negative, which is a typical example of a comparator. The CHP in line 27 is used in the progressive aspect, which is a correlative as defined by Labov (1972: 387). The tense shift from past tense to CHP strengthens the evaluative force of the utterance.

In three out of four cases I have analyzed, the tense shift from past tense to CHP coincides with some other evaluative device: The CHP is used in the progressive aspect twice, and it is used in combination with "all of a sudden" once. Although four cases are certainly not enough data to be representative, Schifffrin's theory seems to work for the majority of tense shifts from past tense to CHP.

### 3.3 Tense shifts in narrative dialogue introducers

Wolfson points out that tense shifts in narrative dialogue introducers do not function the way they do in other situations. The tense choice "does not separate events and it does not serve to keep apart the different roles or participants in the story" (Wolfson 1982: 51). She presents a number of hypotheses, which she all rejects for being inaccurate. Among these hypotheses is the theory that tense choice in dialogue introducers may have to do with the relative status of the people involved. Johnstone (1987) takes over and defends this theory. According to her, "it is

always the nonauthority whose talk is introduced in the past; the authority figure gets introduced either in the HP" or without any dialogue introducer at all (Johnstone 1987: 39).<sup>2</sup>

There are two dialogue introducers in the story *Killing Brother*: "I said" (l. 30) and "my mom thinking quickly says" (l. 36). Taking into consideration the theory defended by Johnstone, "I said" must be seen as opposed to "my mom ... says". The speech of the child is introduced in the past tense, whereas the speech of the child's mother is introduced in the CHP. This fits well into the theory as the relationship between parents and their children is, with regard to authority, usually an asymmetrical one, the children being the inferior.

The story *Back Door* is about a group of boys with one girl among them. The speech of one of the boys is introduced in the CHP (l.30). Kathy's answer is introduced in the past tense (l.32). On the one hand, this example confirms the theory as one girl in a group of teenage boys is likely to have a lower status in the group than the boys. On the other hand, this example contradicts the hypothesis as Kathy is - unexpectedly - able to do what the boys did. Thus, in this particular moment, her status should be higher than the boy's because she was right and the boy was wrong. In this case, Johnstone's hypothesis is only appropriate with regard

to the general status of the people involved, not with regard to their status in the particular moment of the events.

The story *Finger Caught* contains only one dialogue introducer: "she says" (1.46). "She" refers to a dental hygienist, who is certainly a figure of authority when consulting an orthodontist. Although there is no tense shift in dialogue introducers in this story, the use of the CHP for an authority backs Johnstone's theory.

In the story *Basketball*, both Audrey's speech and the speech of "him" - probably the manager of the team - are introduced in the CHP:

24 and I'm like "oh no"

25 and he goes "okay go in for Erin Potters"

The manager's speech being introduced in the CHP supports, but the girl's speech being introduced in the CHP as well contradicts Johnstone's hypothesis. If her theory was appropriate in all cases, Audrey's speech would certainly be introduced in the past tense: Firstly, her general status is undoubtedly lower than her manager's. Secondly, her status is in this particular situation lower than her manager's because she has to go in and she actually does go in although she does not want to do so.

The theory about tense choice in narrative dialogue introducers depending upon the relative status of the people

involved does not work in all cases. Johnstone restricts her own theory at the end of her paper. Tense choice can have to do with relative status, but it can have to do with other factors as well (Johnstone 1987: 50). Basically, I would like to follow her. Tense choice in narrative dialogue introducers tends to follow Johnstone's theory, but there are too many contradictory examples as to generally accept the theory without any tight restrictions. This topic certainly needs further research.

#### 4 Conclusion

My data show that tense shifts from CHP to past tense and vice versa both serve the function of evaluation and the function of separating events. Yet there is a difference in likelihood. Three out of four shifts from CHP to past tense, but only one out of four shifts from past tense to CHP serve to partition off events. On the other hand, shifts from past tense to CHP tend to serve as an evaluative device rather than shifts in the other direction. One shift from CHP to past tense obviously serves both functions.

Not all shifts in the same direction serve the same purpose. Consequently, research on tense shifts has to be on likelihood and not on some kind of "general truths". An interesting possibility for further research - which would substantially exceed the scope of this paper - would be to

check if one speaker always uses the same direction of tense shift for the same purpose or if even the very same speaker uses tense shifts inconsistently. This kind of research could easily be extended to social groups in order to gain some sociolinguistic knowledge.

The theory about tense choice in narrative dialogue introducers depending upon the relative status of the people involved can explain a significant number of examples. Nonetheless, both further quantitative research on this theory, and the development and testing of new hypotheses are needed in order to really get to grips with this feature of conversational narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> Schiffrin does not distinguish between CHP and HP. In this essay, she uses HP in such a restricted sense that it can be considered to be equivalent to the CHP as Wolfson and I use the term. She uses "P" as an abbreviation for past tense

<sup>2</sup> Johnstone uses the term HP instead of CHP just the way Schiffrin does. Nevertheless, she refers to the feature that Wolfson and I call CHP

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## 6 Appendix

### Back Door

1 Toni        when I was about twelve  
2            in my neighborhood  
3            a group of kids ran around together.  
4            and one of the kids was a tomboy  
5            and we never thought much about her being a girl  
             even,  
6            because she did everything we did.  
7            she was better at baseball and football  
8            than most of the guys, you know  
9            she could outrun us all.  
10          uh, Kathy.  
11          and one night we were out  
12          and this guy that we-  
13          none of us liked very much  
14          sort of one of the outcast kids  
15          they were-  
16          he and his family were gone for the vacation  
17          and for some reason  
18          to be to-  
19          to get back at this kid that we didn't like  
20          somebody suggested that we piss through the screen

---

door

21 an- against the back door of their house  
22 just to be cussed, you know  
23 like "let's get at him", y'know  
24 "let's"  
25 and so we're there pissing  
26 through the screen of this guy's back door-  
27 I know this sounds stupid  
28 but that's what we were doing  
29 and-  
30 and then one of the guys looks at Kathy and says  
31 "hey, I bet you can't do that."  
32 and she said  
33 "I bet I can."  
34 and so she whips down her drawers  
35 and actually does a pretty good job-  
36 a better job of pissing through the screen of the  
back door  
37 than any of the guys I think  
38 thought a girl could  
39 and it was-  
40 and here's the fi-  
41 and it was my first realization  
42 that girls could do that at all

---

43           since boys think  
44           you know  
45           that girls can't do that at all  
46           and  
47           but it was also my first realization  
48           that there was a whole bunch of stuff  
49           about the way Kathy looked with her pants down  
50           that was-  
51           that was really quite interesting  
52           and it was-  
53           it's sort of-  
54           it's-  
55           so this is sort of a tale of sexual awakening  
56           and that initial realization that uh-  
57           there really is kind of a difference  
58           that might-  
59           that's less scary than perhaps interesting  
60           you know.

#### Basketball

1 Audrey   my Junior Year I didn't play  
2           and I'd always- I felt  
3           I felt like I'd just go to the practice  
4           just to help them out-

---

5 Lana right.

6 Audrey but uhm

7 so when I really could look down the the bench

8 I'd never want him to look at me

9 because I knew that he'd put me in.

10 Lana yeah.

11 Audrey and I never wanted to go in because

12 like I was-

13 you're playing against these girls

14 that are like are awesome

15 and if you don't-

16 if you're not used to playing them

17 Lana right

18 Audrey you like y-

19 it's hard to like get into it

20 all right?

21 Lana right.

22 Audrey so, ha I looked down the bench

23 and he like looked at me

24 and I'm like "oh no."

25 and he goes "okay go in for Erin Potters"

26 and there's only a minute left

27 and so that's even humiliating at that.

28 Lana ((laughing)) oh

---

29 I know exactly what you mean.

30 Audrey ((laughing))so so I went I wnet in

31 and I had the ball

32 and I just like turned around

33 and I shot it-

34 didn't even look

35 and it like hit off the backboard so hard

36 it was so bad

37 like it

38 I could just like like-

39 it was just so embarrassing.

40 Lana oh Audrey.

41 Audrey but um I know like

42 it all just paid off

43 Because my Senior Year

44 I'd never done so well in anything

45 and I got a lot of offers to play at schools

46 and-

47 Lana and you decided not to?

48 Audrey no because, my

49 like my whole

50 I don't know why

51 but my whole life was geared to like college

52 I could not wait to go to college

---

53           and to go to a small college.

54 Lana     right, right, right.

Dead Cat

1           when I was uhm in high school

2           I had a friend

3           his name was Steve

4           and he drove an orange Chevette

5           that was orange in the inside and the outside.

6           so one day

7           he was going to pick up his girlfriend

8           and she was staying at her grandmother's

9           so he did NOT know the way to her grandmother's house

10          and he was going on this road

11          and he realized he was going the wrong way

12          so he did a U-turn

13          but he didn't cut it HARD enough

14          and he went up into this yard

15          there was a CAT in the yard

16          and he thought the cat would run

17          but it didn't

18          and he hit it.

19          so he got out of the car

20          and poked the cat with a stick

---

21           and it didn't move  
22           and he felt for a pulse  
23           and he didn't feel one  
24           and he picked the cat up  
25           put it on its feet  
26           and it fell back down  
27           and he looked up at the house  
28           and the CURtains were swishing back and forth  
29           like someone had been standing there  
30           so he takes the cat  
31           throws it in the car  
32           and drives away  
33           goes to pick up his girlfriend  
34           goes to see the movie  
35           takes her back to her grandmother's house  
36           and he is on his way HOME  
37           and there is a road that runs around Columbus  
38           that's like 294 in Chicago  
39           it's four main lanes both ways.  
40           everyone is going like seventy miles an hour  
41           so he is driving along  
42           looking at the cat  
43           driving along  
44           looking at the cat

---

45 figures that if the cat was going to wake up  
46 it would have woken up by now  
47 he cranks down the window  
48 takes the cat and throws it out.  
49 a car comes up behind him  
50 flashing its lights.  
51 they pull up next to him  
52 they've got the windshield wipers going  
53 this guy hanging out the window  
54 Steve rolls down the window  
55 and the man leans out of the car and says  
56 "hey mister  
57 your cat just jumped out of the window."  
58 Steve kind of went like this  
59 he didn't want to make a big deal out of it  
60 the guy says  
61 "NO  
62 you don't understand  
63 your CAT just jumped out of the window."  
64 Steve goes  
65 "he knows the way HOME."

---

Finger Caught

1 Iris      Ginger's story reminded me of  
2            well, I don't know  
3            speaking of stupid things you did in your youth.  
4            ((general laughter))  
5            I went to the orthodontist one time.  
6            and they had just gotten-  
7            they had just redone the whole office  
8            it was really nice  
9            and they had put in these new CABinets  
10           that had all the tools and stuff  
11           and I always-  
12           when I was young I'd always like  
13           y'know mess around with things and stuff  
14           and so I y'know  
15           put my finger in this-  
16           there was like this little HOLE  
17           ((teller laughter followed by audience laughter till  
              end of unit))  
18           in this cabinet  
19           and I put my finger in there  
20           and all of a sudden I'm like  
21           and I can't get my FINGER out  
22           ((audience laughter))

---

23           so I kind of start panicking  
24           because I'm kind of like  
25           "what am I going to do?"  
26           and I didn't want anybody to see it of course  
27           so I'm kind of like trying to avoid being seen y'know  
28           but, as I'm trying to pull it out  
29           my finger starts swelling  
30 Ginger oh  
31 Iris      so then I get really sort of panicky  
32           and I'm sitting there  
33           trying and trying to get it out  
34           and trying to disguise it at the same time  
35           and finally the lady  
36           uh one of the ((clears throat))  
37           dental hygienists  
38           I mean whatever you call them  
39           uh came up  
40           and she realized what I'd done  
41           so she brought me some some Vaseline  
42           and put that on  
43           and helped me try to get the finger out  
44           and about five minutes later we got it out  
45           y'know ((laughing))  
46           and then and then she says to me

---

47 "now don't do that again"  
48 ((general laughter))  
49 so:  
50 I was afraid they were going to have to cut open  
their new cabinets  
51 ((more laughter))  
52 Hester or cut open your finger.  
53 Iris well no  
54 I wouldn't have let them do THAT.

#### Killing Brother

1 Leo let's say I was four or five  
2 and I have this older brother  
3 who's just eighteen months older  
4 and he was always beating me up.  
5 and he probably had just beaten me up  
6 and my dad was just finishing the basement  
7 so there was lumber lying around  
8 and hammers and nails and stuff  
9 and so my big brother's down there  
10 probably you know with tools  
11 and since he's got his back to me  
12 and he's squatting down  
13 and he's otherwise occupied

---

14 I think "I'll get back at him."  
15 I pick up a two by four  
16 and just SLAM him across the back of the head  
17 ((laughter))  
18 and instead of like going you know  
19 going "ugh" or anything  
20 he just crumples to the floor.  
21 just doesn't make a sound or anything  
22 just all muscles give out  
23 and he's just lying there on the floor  
24 I go over there  
25 and I shake him y'know.  
26 no movement or anything  
27 I assume he's dead  
28 ((laughter))  
29 I go running up the stairs to my mom  
30 I said "Mom,  
31 I just killed Yancy"  
32 she screams.  
33 we run back down the stairs  
34 but the time we get down there though  
35 he's kind of coming-to y'know  
36 and my mom thinking quickly says  
37 "you know

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38           you must have fallen over  
39           and knocked your head."  
40           but you know to a-  
41           he's-  
42           if I'm five  
43           what he's six and a half  
44           so.  
45           and he-  
46           as far as I know  
47           to this very day  
48           he still doesn't know  
49           that I laid him out with a two by four.