

# Tense and Speech Acts\*

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## 1. Introduction

Tense phenomena are known to be closely connected to the speaker. Observe first the following set of data:

- (1) a. I knew you were/(??) are allergic to alcohol.
- b. Did you know I was/am allergic to alcohol?

In both of the sentences the speaker employs a reporting verb *know* in its past tense form; and the messages reported, i.e. [you/I be allergic to alcohol], are the same except for the deictic expression “I” and “you.” What we should note, however, is the tense choice in each of the examples. The present tense in (1a) sounds odd for some speakers, while both tenses are all right in the interrogative sentence in (1b).

These sorts of problems can be solved within the framework of Speech Acts (Searle 1969): the speaker uses a language to do something else, e.g. asserting, requesting, questioning, and so on. We can say that in (1b) the speaker’s attention is more on getting information rather than asserting the message.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between tense and speech acts, focusing on reporting. Nakayasu (1998) has already argued for the cruciality of the reporting speaker in tense choice. From this it is predicted, naturally, that the choice of tense has a strong connection to what the speaker, who is the authority from a pragmatic point of view, wishes to do in communicating with other participants. First we will clarify speech act and discuss what kind of influence tense can have on the act in Section 2. We will then proceed to typical examples of reporting, where the reporting speaker “I” participates as a reported speaker. Section 4 is devoted to the analysis of interrogative and negative sentences. Section 5 is a conclusion.

## 2. Tense from the Viewpoint of Speech Acts

In using language, we communicate information directly as a statement whose truth value is judged against the fact. However, we often use the speech itself in order to do other things: the speaker is asserting, requesting, questioning, and so forth. In this case, the truth value cannot be judged concerning such speech acts. Austin (1962) designated this kind of utterance as 'performative,' in the sense that the speaker performs an act which is done by uttering something. A typical example of a performative is characterized as having a 1st person subject, possibly 2nd person hearer who often appears as an indirect object, and a performative verb in a present tense. Look at the following:

(2) I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth. (Austin 1962)

The speaker is naming something as well as uttering at the same time. In this sense, if the verb is in a past tense, the utterance is not performative: utterance and naming (act) are not the same time.

Ross (1970) suggests that every utterance is performative in its nature and postulates an underlying performative clause [I say to you] in front of the declarative sentence. This analysis clearly shows that every utterance is viewed from the here and now of the speaker. The present tense is therefore a default which is connected to the speaker's present situation unless otherwise specified.

Then, what does the past tense mean? It is a marked tense which specifies a temporal distance from the here and now of the speaker. Its prototypical use sets up a definite reference point in the past on the time axis and places the situation there:

(3) I came to Kagoshima four years ago.

In its metaphorical use, on the other hand, the past tense signifies a psychological distance from a situation which could be represented by a direct statement. Compare the examples of indirect speech act:

- (4) a. Can you pass me the salt?  
b. Could you pass me the salt?

In (4) the speaker is not asking if the hearer has the ability to pass him or her the salt with the interrogative sentences; he or she is asking the hearer to do something else, i.e. to pass him or her the salt. It is often pointed out that the so-called past tense form *could* sounds more polite, implying some distance. Oakeshott-Taylor (1984b) considers this distance as lack of involvement, that is, the speaker distances him- or herself from the speech act which he or she is performing. Another important metaphorical use of the past tense is counterfactual, which typically appears in subjunctive mood:

- (5) I wish I was a bird.

However, the counterfactual past tense is not only for subjunctives. We will look at this use in more detail in relation to speech acts in the next section.

### 3. Tense and Reporting

This section will deal with the relationship between tense and speech acts in a reporting situation. First we will clarify reporting and then closely examine speech acts taking some expressions such as *I thought*.

#### 3.1. Reporting

Reporting is a whole set of means by which we refer to a speech, thought, perception, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Nakayasu (1998) clarifies reporting and each participant utilizing the following typical example:

- (6) (I say to you) John told Mary (that) Bill loves Sue.

Note that a performative clause [I say to you] is postulated as we have seen in the last section. The vital participant is the reporting speaker “I,” who is the final authority in choosing tense. “You” is the hearer of the report. The reported speaker is *John*, who is the subject of the sentence and should be

strictly distinguished from the reporting speaker. The hearer of the language event *told*, which can also be referred to as the reporting verb, is *Mary*. Other participants are the subject and the object of the (reported) message *Bill* and *Sue*, the latter being less important. We should not miss the possibility of all the participants being the same person (a monologue), or some of them being the same. The reported speaker, for example, could be the reporting speaker him- or herself, which is one of the conditions for a performative.

Nakayasu's argument (1998) is two-fold: (i) the reporting speaker is the final authority in choosing tense; and (ii) the reporting speaker utilizes three major factors in order to choose a proper tense: semantic, syntactic and pragmatic factors. In Nakayasu (forthcoming) I will characterize the reporting speaker as very pragmatic, and develop the theory in the pragmatic part. Here we will extend the observation to the relationship between tense choice and speech acts.

### 3.2. Factuality and Tense

Oakeshott-Taylor (1984a) has studied the relation between factuality and intonation, analyzing the examples of such as the one with *thought*:

- (7) A: This is John's wife  
B: Yes, I **thought** he was ,married
- (8) A: This is John's fiancée  
B: But I thought he was **married**

(Oakeshott-Taylor 1984a)

Though the sentence "I thought he was married" appears in both of the conversations above, there is a difference in factuality. In (7) the situation described in the reported message conforms with the 'real' state of affairs, that is, it is factual. In (8), on the other hand, the situation is counterfactual: the content of the reported message does not coincide with the perceived state of affairs, that is, he is not married. This is the third use of the past tense we have mentioned in the last section. What can we say concerning speech acts by taking this intriguing observation into consideration? Let us examine the

semantics of the reporting with *think* (*thought*) before proceeding.

There are two sorts of past reporting concerning the semantic relation between the reporting verb and the reported message (Nakayasu 1998). In one case the reporting speaker has a responsibility for the truth value of the message mostly because he or she admits it is an established fact,<sup>2</sup> and therefore he or she has a right to choose either tense.<sup>3</sup> Verbs such as *thought* exemplifies the other case. Since the reported message exists only in the reported speaker's world, the reporting speaker cannot be responsible for the truth value of message and therefore he or she has to employ a past tense:

(9) I thought he was/\*is married.

To give a more detailed explanation to the phenomenon such as (7) and (8), consider the following examples:

(10) a. John thinks Mary is twenty, doesn't he?/\*isn't she?

b. I think Mary is twenty, \*don't I?/isn't she?

(Oakeshott-Taylor 1984b)

They are in the present tense and questioned by a tag. Note that the reported speaker is *John* in (10a) while in (10b), it is "I," who is also the reporting speaker. In the latter case, "I think" cannot be questioned by a tag: it contradicts the reporting speaker's attitude. In this sense it is performative. The fact that it has the first person subject and the present tense also demonstrates that it is a performative verb. Oakeshott-Taylor (1984b) furthermore observes that it is also the case even if the reporting verb and the verb in the reported message are in the past tense:

(11) A: Have you met John's fiancée?

B: But I thought John was married, isn't he?

A: No, of course he isn't

(ibid.)

He concludes that this use of past tense is counterfactual, that it is completely

natural in a present tense situation, and that it indicates the *present* attitude of the speaker. The observation that the report by *I thought* can be performative if it is counterfactual will give us a promising clue to the explication of the semantics and pragmatics of tense. The reporting speaker “I” appears as a reported speaker, which means that the situation is very close to the here and now of him or her.

Interestingly enough, what is true for *I thought* is to a considerable extent true for other expressions as well. Consider *I said*, for example. It should be noted that *said* often takes a present tense in the reported message: in such cases the reporting speaker considers the message as valid at the present. Look at the example below, however:

- (12) a. John said that Mary was/is a liar.  
      b. I said that Mary was/\*is a liar.<sup>4</sup> (Sawada 1994)

The present tense sounds strange for some speakers<sup>4</sup> if the reported speaker is “I.” This fact also supports the observation we have just seen. Different from *I thought*, there is little evidence that *I said* is related to counterfactuality. However, “I” is strongly asserting his or her opinion probably because the hearer has just told him or her something which contradicts what the speaker said before. We can therefore say that the reporting speaker expresses some sort of speech act, more precisely, re-stating and emphasizing his or her past speech act, which makes him or her prefer a past tense in the reported message, that is, the same tense as *said*. This is demonstrated by the conversation below:

- (13) (A and B are roommates. B already said to A, “I’m going to cook dinner.”)  
      A : I’m going to cook dinner tonight.  
      B : No, I said I was going to do it.

Shang (p.c.) points out that the present tense is also possible if the reporting speaker is emphasizing that he or she still wants to do it.<sup>5/6</sup> This might be because the verb *said* itself can take a present tense though *thought* seldom

takes it.

It is now clear that such expressions as *I thought* and *I said* can be analyzed from the viewpoint of speech acts.

#### 4. Interrogative Sentences and Negation

Having examined some tense phenomena in connection with speech acts, our next step is to apply these observations to other speech acts.

##### 4.1. Interrogative Sentences

To begin with, we return to the example cited in the introduction.

- (1) a. I knew you were/(??) are allergic to alcohol.  
 b. Did you know I was/am allergic to alcohol?

The present tense in (1a) sounds odd for some speakers. We pointed out that in both of the sentences the reporting verb is *know* in its past tense form and that the message reported is [you/I be allergic to alcohol]. For what reason does the judgment differ between declarative/interrogative sentences?

In the first place, in Costa (1972), the reporting verb *knew* is classified as a B-verb, which is not quite factive and so triggers the Sequence of Tenses. This would be the biggest reason why the past tense is preferred in the declarative sentence. Second, the subject is "I" in (1a), which allows a possibility of performative reading as we saw in Section 3. Third, as I argue in Nakayasu (forthcoming), the reporting speaker's attention in the interrogative sentence (1b) is more on drawing out information from the hearer than on conveying the information. Fourth, Houghton (p.c.) noticed the politeness when the reporting speaker employs *Did you know* rather than *Do you know*<sup>7</sup>. This is the second use of the past tense (see Section 2) and it does not necessarily have to employ a past tense in its complement clause. With the past tense the reporting speaker distances him- or herself from the speech act he or she intends to do. In the example below the discourse is completely for present tense; however, *Did you know* is used in order to soften the impact of introducing a new piece of information:

(14)

Cady: But you know how hard it is to get a boy into a good college.

He has to have leadership as well as grades.

Anne: Did you know he is advertising his ham-radio equipment for sale this weekend? He hasn't used it now for several years. Can you really say his motivation for college is electronics?

(Brown Corpus)

#### 4.2. Negation

Negative elements are known to have a certain influence on the pragmatic sense.

(15) a. I didn't know you were/(???) are allergic to alcohol.

b. Didn't you know I was/(???) am allergic to alcohol?

The sentences in (15) are negative counterparts of (1a) and (1b), respectively. Very interestingly, the present tense sounds less natural in (15) than in (1). Nakayasu (forthcoming) supposes that this is because the reporting speaker's attention is on the negative element; it is not, however, a sufficient explanation for the phenomenon.

In order to find a way out of this problem, let us examine the explanation given by Givón (1993). He assumes that there are two kinds of assertions, i.e. affirmative and negative, and that negation is a kind of speech act, i.e. denial:

AFF-assertion: The hearer does not know,  
the speaker knows.

NEG-assertion: The hearer knows wrong,  
the speaker knows better.

Givón (1993)

In NEG-assertion the reporting speaker is not communicating new information but correcting the hearer's mistaken beliefs. In (15a), therefore, the hearer had wrongly expected that the reporting speaker knew it. For this reason the past tense is strongly preferred. How can we explain, then, the



negative question in (15b)? The attention of the reporting speaker is not getting information from the hearer; rather representing some other speech act. It has a strong touch of surprise and therefore the reporting speaker is accusing the hearer: he or she should have known it long time ago.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have discussed the relationship between tense and speech acts with special reference to reporting context. We clarified speech acts and considered the prototypical and metaphorical uses of tense taking speech acts into consideration. We then extended the observation to reporting within the framework of Nakayasu (1998). Analyzing expressions such as *I thought* and *I said*, it has become clear that they have a performative nature, which signifies the speaker's present attitude. Other targets to explain were interrogative and negative sentences, where relevant speech acts are somewhat different from the one discussed earlier in this paper. These results lead to the conclusion that the reporting speaker is dynamically interacting with the context utilizing some speech acts.

## Notes

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1. Since reporting includes reported thought and perception as well as reported speech, we do not assume its direct counterpart as has often been done by many researchers.
2. The terms "fact" and "factuality" are different. See Oakeshott-Taylor (1984a) for detailed discussion.
3. If the message is valid only in the past even when it is an established fact, a past tense has to be employed. Note that this distinction is not verb classification: the reporting speaker decides which case the report belongs to.
4. The judgment is according to Sawada (1994). My informants react positively to the present tense here. This will support the assumption in

Nakayasu (1998) that there is significant difference in judgment according to speaker.

5. *Be going to* in the reported message sounds strange to many speakers. Harris (p.c.) says that (iii) is the best :
  - ( i ) \*I said I'm gonna do it and I'm gonna do it.
  - ( ii ) ?I said I'll to it and I'll do it.
  - ( iii ) I said I'd do it and I'll do it.
6. The fact that the subject of the message is also "I" might have some influence on the judgment.
7. The following example shows that the past tense is employed to be polite to the customer :
  - ( i ) Did you know we sell watches? (found in a department store)Interestingly, if we change *sell* to its past tense from *sold*, there arises a reading that the department store no longer sells watches.

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