

Past tense reference to future eventualities

A Reichenbachian approach

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The simple past in Dutch, as in many other European languages, is not necessarily used to refer to a past eventuality. A Dutch example of a verb in simple past that does not refer to a past event, taken from the Spoken Dutch Corpus (CGN), is: *Pa die ging morgen golfen* ‘Dad is going to play golf tomorrow.’ Here, the past tense verb *ging* ‘went’ can be called a ‘fake past’, since it refers to a future eventuality, as can be seen from the adverb *tomorrow*. We argue that this use of the past tense is not modal, because it does not involve reference to a counterfactual, hypothetical, or unlikely eventuality. We present a Reichenbachian (1947) analysis of this use of past tense, in which we argue that while the eventuality takes place in the future, past tense is used to indicate that the point of perspective (R) is situated in the past (i.e. R-S-E).

Keywords: spoken Dutch, fake past, point of perspective, Reichenbachian analysis, future

1. Introduction

Toward the end of the *Grote Taaldag* ‘Great Language Day’ 2023, members of our research group were gathering to go out for dinner together. One of our colleagues, Ad, was still engaged in a busy conversation on the other side of the room. *Ging Ad ook mee?* ‘Will Ad join us?’, one of us asked, just to be sure, and at the same moment we realized that we had used yet another one of those constructions, i.e. a simple past tense *ging* ‘went’ to refer to an event in the future. Of course Ad joined us. In this paper we present a Reichenbachian analysis of this particular, but quite common use of past tense to refer to a future or present eventuality in spoken Dutch. Note that we use the term *eventuality* as a comprehensive term for events as well as states (Bach 1986).

Although the use of past tense when it does not actually refer to the past is cross-linguistically well-studied, these studies usually focus on irrealis marking, in particular counterfactuals, or more generally the use of past tense in relation to epistemic modality, mood, evidentiality, as well as politeness (e.g. Steele 1975; Iatridou 2000; Boogaart 2007; Hogeweg 2009; Patard 2014). However, in the above utterance *Ging Ad ook mee?* the use of the past tense does not appear to mark irrealis. This is evidenced not only by the fact that Ad did join us, but also because we actually had no doubts about it either when we asked. The question then is why past tense was used here and what the difference is with the use of present tense, which in Dutch is used for reference to the future, as in *Gaat Ad ook mee?* ‘Will Ad join us?’

One intuitive difference between past and present tense in this context is that the question in the present tense is interpreted as a genuine question in the sense that the speaker really does not know the answer. By contrast, in the past tense variant, the speaker, who after all also does not know (for sure) whether Ad will be joining us (otherwise they would not ask) seems to indicate that they are aware that this information should be available. The question we address in this paper is what meaning aspect of the past tense makes its use suited to refer to a future eventuality.

Thieroff (1999) used the term *false past* for past tense morphology with a non-past interpretation, and Iatridou (2000: 235) coined the term *fake past* for it. But despite its false or fake character, Iatridou argued that “the contribution of past tense is, in fact, real” (Iatridou 2000: 244). In her view, past tense has the same meaning whether it refers to the past or not. Only the domain it operates on varies. That is to say, the meaning of temporal past is derived from a more general meaning, which is the exclusion of the actual time (past tense use) or world (contrary to fact use) from the topic under discussion. This approach is reminiscent to that of Steele (1975), who discusses the cross-linguistic interrelationship between past tense and irrealis, two notions which she argues to have in common the semantic primitive *dissociative*. While past time is dissociated from present time, irrealis is dissociated from reality. Thus, according to Steele (1975), Iatridou (2000), and others (e.g. Schulz 2014; Makay 2019), the core meaning of past tense morphology is not to refer to the past, but to indicate removal from the here and now, which can be another time or another world. Steele (1975: 217) also makes the connection with the use of past tense for politeness “to detach oneself as much as possible from the request”.

Against the argument that the past tense can be seen as ‘distant from present reality’, Bybee (1995) cites James (1982), who argues that the past tense in normal contexts still means ‘before moment of speaking’ and not ‘distant’. Bybee (1995) argues it is not the remoteness of the past tense, but rather its combination with

modality that can cause it to deviate from its basic meaning of before moment of speech. Similarly, Hogeweg (2009) argues that the basic meaning of past tense is past time reference, which may be extended in the context of conditionals that have predictions as part of their meaning. Past time reference then gives rise to an implicature that the conditional refers to an alternative past, which is the past in an alternative world, resulting in a counterfactual meaning. Patard (2019) also takes the core meaning of past tense to be temporal. She argues that every past tense encodes anteriority to the time of speech. This default interpretation is found in ordinary, productive contexts, while modal interpretations are obtained only through additional modal markers, or in contexts that are irregular, idiosyncratic and less predictable.

These approaches seem quite plausible for counterfactuals and other constructions that mark irrealis or epistemic modality, but the question *Ging Ad ook mee?* ‘Will Ad join us?’ neither expresses irrealis nor has any markers of modality, although there could still be an undertone of modality, since there is some doubt about Ad’s participation. Yet, the question was asked out of the blue, so at first glance the context does not seem to provide a reason to deviate from ordinary reference to the past. In Section 2, however, we will argue that because the question was asked in a spoken context, i.e. a dialogue between interlocutors, the context *does* give a reason not to interpret the past tense as referring to a past eventuality. Section 3 presents our analysis of the phenomenon in question, which is further supported by a small-scale corpus study reported in Section 4. Section 5 concludes.

2. Narrative past tense

Janssen (1994: 122) notes that in Dutch “[in] adult conversation, there are several cases where the preterit [past tense] can be used but where the event referred to is not situated in the past.” He gives a list of such uses, including counterfactuals, “pieces of advice by means of an irreality”, modals, wishes, politeness formulas, and quote-like wording. According to him, these uses have in common that they express “the speaker’s distancing himself from the event referred to”, as already outlined in Janssen (1989). Janssen (1994) notes that the use of the present perfect instead of past tense in these cases would be “completely inadequate”, exactly because of this distance between the speaker and the event that characterizes the use of past tense. Unlike the past tense, the present perfect is considered an expression “by means of which the speaker signals his actual referential concern with the stage at the end of the main-verb event” (Janssen 1994: 124).

In this article, we leave out the modal uses of the past tense in order to focus on its temporal (futate) use. We argue that past tense in Dutch can also refer to an actual event in the future (i.e. the real future, insofar as one can know it). Reichenbach (1947) argues that past tense and present perfect have in common that the eventuality E precedes the speech time S, while they differ in the point of reference R. This point of reference, or rather point of perspective (cf. Boogaart 1999), coincides with E when a past tense is used, but with S when a present perfect is used. R is considered a point of perspective “at which, for instance, a story character is seeing or contemplating things” (Boogaart 1999: 240). The coincidence of E and R in case of a past tense thus makes it a narrative tense, whereas the present perfect is considered a non-narrative tense (Boogaart 1999; de Swart 2007).

By coinciding R with S instead of E in the present perfect, the speaker is inviting the hearer to view the past eventuality from the present (E-R,S), which does justice to the idea that present perfect marks the relevance of a past eventuality at the time of speech (cf. Comrie 1976). By contrast, past tense is ideally suited for telling a story because, when using the past tense, the speaker invites the hearer to take the perspective of the narrator or a character in the story and thus, as it were, to participate in the eventualities (E, R-S). In Dutch past tense is a narrative tense, which excludes a current relevance interpretation, while in other languages such as English, past tense can also be used in case of current relevance (Schaden 2009). For example, consider a situation in which someone visits their friend and notices the recently painted kitchen wall. In this situation the visitor could say *Hey, you painted the kitchen!* in English, whereas in Dutch the use of past tense would be inadequate: *Hé, je schilderde de keuken!* Instead, the present perfect should be used in this case: *Hé, je hebt de keuken geschilderd!* ‘Hey, you have painted the kitchen!’ This is consistent with Boogaart’s (1999) claim that the choice for a simple past tense in Dutch evokes a narrative interpretation (an internal viewpoint), while the choice for the present perfect evokes a current relevance meaning (the external viewpoint) in the same context. This is illustrated by the following pair of sentences from Boogaart (1999: 158):

- (1) a. *Hij is weggegaan en later weer teruggekomen.*
 he is away.go.PRF and later again back.come.PRF
 ‘He left and came back later.’
 b. *Hij ging weg en kwam later weer terug.*
 he go.PST away and come.PST later again back
 ‘He left and came back later.’

Boogaart (1999: 159) points out that, although (1a) “in no way constitutes an incoherent sequence, it does have a non-narrative flavour to it (...), which seems to

consist precisely in the fact that the situations are both evaluated in their own right from the perspective of the present moment.” He concludes from this that in Dutch the present perfect in sequences such as (1a) is only expected in non-narrative discourse or dialogue (cf. Le Bruyn et al. 2019; Mulder et al. 2022).

By contrast, (1b) receives a narrative interpretation, as if it were part of an unfolding story. Therefore, we may expect past tense to be used in spoken language (or dialogue) only as part of a narrative. The simple past tense in French is typically used for narration (de Swart 2007), even to the extent that speakers of French consider its use necessary because “otherwise, nobody knows it’s a story” (Labeau 2022:1). Dutch past tense is a narrative tense as well (Boogaart 1999), which cannot be used with a current relevance (E-R,S) interpretation, unlike English simple past (Mulder et al. 2022). This answers the question of why *Ging Ad ook mee?* ‘Will Ad join us?’ in the spoken out-of-the-blue context outlined above is not interpreted as past time reference. It was not uttered as part of a narrative. Indeed, reference to the past would be the optimal interpretation if someone told a story about their previous trip to the Grote Taaldag, and the interlocutor asked *Ging Ad ook mee?* ‘Did Ad join you?’ for clarification. The question addressed in Section 3 is what makes past tense suitable to refer to a future eventuality in a non-narrative context, i.e. dialogue.

3. Past point of perspective

One example of past tense reference to a future eventuality presented by Janssen (1994:122) seems similar to our target construction. He calls it ‘quote-like wording’ (the gloss is added by us):

- (2) *Gisteravond vertrok je morgen en nu vertrek je*
 yesterday.evening leave.PST you tomorrow and now leave.PRES you
overmorgen. Wat moet ik nu geloven?
 over.tomorrow what must.PRES I now believe
 ‘Last night you were leaving tomorrow and now you are leaving the day after
 tomorrow! What am I to believe now?’

Unlike the temporal adverb *morgen* ‘tomorrow’, which is interpreted as the reference time for the eventuality of leaving, the temporal adverb *gisteravond* ‘last night’ is not related to this eventuality. Rather, it seems to refer to an implicit eventuality of the addressee’s telling the speaker that they would leave tomorrow. Thus, *gisteravond* explicitly refers to a point of perspective in the past. In Reichenbachian terms, this interpretation can be defined as R-S-E, which can be paraphrased as ‘Last night you said you would leave tomorrow’. Thus, the reference

time *last night* relates to the E of *said* and *tomorrow* to the E of *leave*. Indeed, such a paraphrase is an instantiation of what Reichenbach (1947: 297) calls *posterior past*, which includes the readings R-E-S, R-E,S, but also our R-S-E. However, the use of posterior past in the paraphrase above as well as in other examples found in the literature, such as *I did not know he would come tomorrow* (Horie et al. 2012), are typically found in dependent clauses where the point of reference R is determined by the matrix clause. Hence, the past tense in these cases is an instantiation of so-called Sequence of Tense (cf. Abusch 1997; Sharvit 2021).

Note that the Dutch example in (2) receives a counterfactual interpretation that becomes clear from the continuation, which is probably due to the explicit reference to the past by the adverb *gisteravond* ‘last night’. Without such an explicit temporal adverb referring to the past, the counterfactual reading disappears, while the past point of perspective remains.

While none of the past tense uses discussed by Janssen (1994) is identical to our target construction, although the example in (2) comes close, some German examples discussed in the literature are (Wunderlich 1970; Thieroff 1999; Patard 2014), such as (3), taken from Wunderlich (1970: 139).

- (3) *Wer erhielt das Bier?*
 who get.PST the beer
 ‘Who gets the beer?’

Wunderlich analyzes the sentence by creating a paraphrase, namely ‘Who ordered the beer? I have a beer here. Who gets the beer?’ Wunderlich argues that the past tense in (3) is due to the past tense ordering of the beer in the first sentence that “contaminates” the third sentence. Similarly, Thieroff (1999: 154) argues that (3) can be interpreted as simultaneously referring to the past (‘Who ordered the beer?’) and the present (‘Who is getting the beer now?’).

Another example provided by Wunderlich (1970: 140) is (4):

- (4) *Morgen gab es den Faust im Theater.*
 tomorrow give it the Faust in.the theatre
 ‘Faust is in theatre tomorrow.’

Wunderlich (1970) explains the use of the past tense in this case by positing an underlying process of transformation, in which (4) has to be interpreted as a subordinate clause affected by the past tense of the matrix clause, as in ‘It was announced/I heard/read that Faust is in theatre tomorrow.’ Patard (2014) accordingly interprets the past tense in (3) as a marker of evidentiality that signals that the speaker has only indirect evidence for their statement for which they rely on a past source (cf. Griffioen et al. 2018 for a similar use of the past tense evidentiality marker *dacht ik* ‘I thought’ as opposed to *denk ik* ‘I think’ in Dutch). If the present

tense *gibt* were used in (4), it would just refer to a future eventuality as a fact for which no indirect evidentiality marking would be needed.

Boogaart (2007) points out that certain special uses of past tense appear to present instances of Free Indirect Discourse or reported thoughts (cf. Vandelanotte 2004). Either verbs of saying, thinking, or believing, are given explicitly, or they can be inferred from the discourse. Consider the following example of Free Indirect Discourse from Eckardt (2021: 2232).

(5) *Anna sighed. Tomorrow was Christmas, alas!*

The first sentence in (5) is interpreted from the narrator's perspective, while the second one is interpreted as Anna's thought. While the narrative past tense verb *was* indicates that Anna's thought is presented from the external narrator's perspective, the temporal adverb *tomorrow* is interpreted from the protagonist's (Anna's) perspective. The use of Free Indirect Discourse to represent protagonists' thoughts emerged in Dutch literary prose in the nineteenth century (Clement 2014). Interestingly, however, in her corpus study of Dutch literary prose through the ages, Clement (2014) finds a preliminary form of Free Indirect Discourse already present in seventeenth-century low-literature novels, but only in direct speech reports. This suggests that Free Indirect Discourse was used in spoken language before it became used as a literary technique.

According to Boogaart (2007), the different readings of (imperfective) past tense are the result of R preceding S, but there are no hard restrictions on how R is to be determined in the context. It can be a strictly temporal reference point, or an internal point of perspective as in past tense narratives, or an epistemic evaluation time, as long as there is someone who can evaluate the probability of the state of affairs. Patard (2019) also takes the core meaning of past tense to be temporal in the sense that R precedes S. In this view, what is universally anterior to S in the case of past tense, is not E (as is commonly assumed, e.g. in Mulder et al. 2022), but R. Patard (2019) assumes, like Boogaart (2007), that R can be different things, namely a past topic time, an aspectual vantage time (such as internal viewpoint), or an epistemic evaluation point.

Although the phenomenon of past tense referring to a future eventuality in non-modal sentences is hardly discussed in the literature, we have seen that certain authors do allude to it and provide valuable analyses applicable to the current question of how to explain the fact that past tense can refer to future eventualities in spoken Dutch. Building upon Wunderlich's (1970) intuitive characterization of the phenomenon in question, and extending Boogaart's (2007) and Patard's (2019) analyses of the use of fake past in modal contexts, we propose that the non-modal fake past tense in Dutch can be characterized as a particular instantiation of what Reichenbach (1947) called *posterior past*, defined as R-S-E, where R is an

implicit point of perspective in the past. The next section reports on a corpus study that further supports this analysis.

4. Occurrences of past tense reference to future eventualities in spoken Dutch

From the Spoken Dutch Corpus (*Corpus Gesproken Nederlands*, cf. Oostdijk 2000), eight collections of files were filtered on past verb forms:

- Business negotiations;
- Interviews and discussions (broadcast);
- Interviews with Dutch teachers;
- Lectures and seminars;
- Live commentaries (broadcast);
- Spontaneous conversations;
- Face-to-face;
- Telephone conversations.

These collections consist of (more or less) spontaneous spoken language, as we assume the phenomenon is most likely to occur in conversations between people who share a common ground. Both the Belgian and the Netherlandic Dutch parts of the corpus were included in the analysis.

The sentences were selected for explicit future markers in the left and right contexts of the verb. The phenomenon can be used without explicit future markers (and probably *is* in most cases), but without these explicit future markers the construction would be too difficult to distinguish from regular narrative or counterfactual use of the past tense. The following future markers were chosen to collect the data:

- *morgen* – ‘tomorrow’
- *volgend(e)* – ‘following’ (used in constructions like *volgende week* ‘next week’)
- *aanstaand(e)* – ‘upcoming’
- *komend(e)* – ‘coming’
- *over* + [a phrase denoting a quantity] + [one of the following words] – ‘in’ x *dag(en)* ‘day(s)’ x *week/weken* ‘week/weeks’ x *maand(en)* ‘month(s)’ x *jaar* – ‘year’

The sentences were then scanned for the use of past tense in reference to the future. To this end, all instances of past tense modal verbs were removed, because these, e.g. *zouden* ‘would’, often have a different meaning than their present tense counterparts, such as *zullen* ‘will’. Past tense modals can, of course, occur in ref-

erence to the future in the same way as other verbs, as shown in (6), but these occurrences are too hard to distinguish from regular past modals that occur more frequently.

- (6) *Jij kon morgen voor mij boodschappen doen, hè?*
 you can.PST tomorrow for me groceries do PRT
 ‘You will do the shopping for me tomorrow, right?’

We found that the past tense was used on a non-modal verb to refer to a future eventuality in 41 cases, of a total of 159,940 verb tokens. Of these hits, 18 were Netherlandic (of a total of 103,336 Netherlandic verb tokens) and 23 were Belgian (of a total of 53,604 Belgian verb tokens). A list of these 41 items within context are available in a repository.¹ We discuss some of these items below. Note that we added interpunction, and we have made the relevant past tense verbs bold, but we do not provide glosses for reasons of space.

Although in a few cases, a counterfactual reading might be possible as well, in most cases the past tense verb refers to a future eventuality that is expected to actually happen, such as in (7).

- (7) *Morgen kon Jola niet omdat Jola ging met iemand van d'r werk eten.*
 ‘Tomorrow Jola can’t make it because she’s having dinner with someone from work.’

In this case, R indicated by the past tense form refers to a moment in the past at which the speaker obtained evidence for the future eventuality of Jola having dinner with someone from her work (R-S-E). In two cases we found explicit reference to this point of perspective in the past. These cases are given in (8) and (9).

- (8) *Want morgen hadden jullie het plannetje om naar Veldhoven te gaan.*
 ‘Because you had planned to go to Veldhoven tomorrow.’
- (9) A: *Jullie gingen morgen naar tante Ans zei uh ...*
 B: *Ja heb je dat gehoord?*
 A: ‘You were going to aunt Ans tomorrow said ehm ...’
 B: ‘Yes, did you hear that?’

In (8) the temporal adverb *morgen* ‘tomorrow’ has syntactic scope over the main clause, but semantically it only has scope over the subclause (as in the English translation). The past tense refers to the planning of the trip to Veldhoven in the past. (9) is clearly a case of reportative evidentiality. R can be taken as the point in time at which the evidence for tomorrow’s plan was obtained by the speaker (cf. Boogaart 2007).

1. <https://doi.org/10.34973/kypa-nk77>

In two other cases, the speaker makes clear that they are aware of the fact that plans about the future were made in the past, and ask for confirmation, as in (10), or try and refresh their own memory, as in (11).

- (10) *Volgende week zondag dan gaan we **gingen** we nog uit eten hè?*
 ‘Next Sunday we’re going out to dinner, right?’
- (11) *Even denken, wat **was** er ook alweer volgende week?*
 ‘Let me think, what’s happening next week?’

In all other cases, the past tense is also understood to refer to a point of perspective in the past that relates to a future eventuality, but the point of perspective is left implicit, as illustrated by (12)–(14).

- (12) *Maar dat is morgenavond en het **begon** om zeven uur.*
 ‘But that will be tomorrow night and it will start at seven.’
- (13) *Morgen komt de huisdokter en ze **gingen** het tegen de huisdokter zeggen.*
 ‘Tomorrow the GP is coming and they will tell the GP.’
- (14) A: *Pa die **ging** morgen golfen.*
 B: *Gaat die morgen golfen?*
 A: ‘Dad is going to play golf tomorrow.’
 B: ‘Is he going to play golf tomorrow?’

Again, the reason that the past tense unambiguously refers to a future eventuality in these cases is not just because a temporal adverb referring to the future is used, since that is merely an artefact of our specific search terms in the Spoken Dutch Corpus, but mainly because the past tense verbs in these cases occur in non-narrative dialogues, thereby forcing a non-narrative, non-past interpretation R-S-E.

We have seen that a frequent use of past tense in Dutch dialogue is to refer to a future eventuality while at the same time indicating to the hearer that the point of perspective at which the information about the future eventuality was obtained is in the past. Although the past tense may thus contribute to a reading of indirect evidentiality (Patard 2014; Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2003), this need not be the case. One day one of the authors on their way to the kitchen said to their partner, *Ik **ging** even een eitje bakken* ‘I’m going to fry an egg’ (literally ‘I went to fry an egg’). The past tense indicates that the plan to fry an egg had been made before (R-S-E). Clearly, there is no indirect evidentiality involved here, because the statement is in first person, for which the speaker does not have to indicate the source of evidence (de Schepper & de Hoop 2012).

Similarly, the past tense may contribute to the perception of politeness. A real life example is the following.

- (15) A: *De trein gaat om 15:24.*
 B: [een paar minuten later] *Hoe laat ging de trein?*
 A: ‘The train will depart at 3:24 PM.’
 B: [a few minutes later] ‘What time does the train leave?’

Speaker A’s utterance determines the perspective point R to which the past tense in B’s question relates. Had speaker B used a present tense here, it might have come across as rude to speaker A, since A had already given B the requested information a few minutes ago. By using past tense, B indicates awareness of this fact, making the utterance more polite than if they had used present tense to refer to a future eventuality.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued for a temporal analysis of a fake past tense that seems extremely common in Dutch but has received surprisingly little attention in the literature on functions of past tense uses, at least to the best of our knowledge. Our Reichenbachian analysis accounts for this use by assuming that while E refers to a future eventuality the past tense of the verb relates to a perspective point R in the past, hence is an instantiation of Reichenbach’s (1947) ‘posterior past’, i.e. R-S-E. This analysis goes beyond well-known counterfactual or modal uses of the past tense as it concerns past tense reference to a ‘real’ future eventuality, while indicating that the point of perspective from which this future eventuality is viewed is situated in the past.

We argued that the reason this use of fake past tense does not lead to conflicts in interpretation is because it is used in dialogue, where competition with narrative past tense hardly occurs in Dutch, which does not allow for a current relevance interpretation of past tense, unlike for example English (Schaden 2009; Mulder et al. 2022).

Our analysis contributes to the ongoing debate in theoretical linguistics about whether past tense has past time reference as its root meaning (e.g. Boogaart 2007; Hogeweg 2009; Patard 2014, 2019) or a more abstract, underlying meaning in terms of distance from reality (e.g. Iatridou 2000; Schulz 2014; Makay 2019) in that it strongly supports the former view. We hope to have shown that this use of fake past in Dutch is not fake after all, as it undoubtedly refers to the past, albeit not to a past eventuality E expressed by the past tense verb, but to a past point of perspective R.

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Glossary





Abbreviations used in the glosses are:

PRS	present
PRF	perfective
PRT	particle
PST	past

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