

## CHAPTER - VIII

The present author neither pretends that the foregoing pages have covered all the important questions that can be asked about the past perfective in English nor ventures to offer any sweeping solutions to the problems discussed. It should by now be clear that the present study is by and large expository in nature. It has sought to expose the anomalies in the descriptions of the past perfective as well as in its pragmatic use. But exposition of any kind is seldom non-resultative. The present study indeed has yielded some results which it will be our task to catalogue in the first section of this summing up. The second and final section seeks to extend the horizons of this expository study by giving a deconstructive turn to the survey. If it does nothing else, it at least welcomes the possibility of deconstructive readings of English grammatical texts : that is to say, it tentatively suggests that a 'deconstruction' of English grammar is not wholly impossible. This section will, however, inescapably repeat some of the material already used in the earlier chapters; but it will do so from a fresh angle, with a view to (as we have declared in the first section of 'Introduction') pointing to the nature of the problem and the probable sources of the complexities involved in both theoretical and practical uses of the past perfective.

## (1)

Sifting the results obtained from the kind of study that we have made of the past perfective in English, we may come up with the following points.

- (1) The past perfective in general, and what is called the paradoxical past perfective in particular, demand further discussion and explanation than is available. As regards the paradoxical past perfective (the past perfective + before + past perfective and the simple past + before + past perfective structures), we have in theory not only as many as seven entirely different explanations but also what might be called Quirk-Leech contradiction (the first section of Chapter IV makes the latter clear). The collation of these explanations — Jespersen (1924 : 266) & (1931 : 83), Quirk et al (1985 : 1020), Quirk (Appendix I), Leech (Appendix II), the CCELD (1987 : 666), and Edgren (1971 : 133-4) — renders it impossible to deploy the non-normal past perfective at the pragmatic level. While it should be highly debatable whether the paradoxical or non-normal use of the past perfective is at all necessary, the present study at least makes it abundantly clear that this queer variant of the past perfective — if allowed to exist — needs be protected from its susceptibility to more than one interpretation.

- (2) The linguistic formulae available for tense in general and the pluperfect in particular do not wholly cover the issues we are concerned with.
- (3) Usage is more often than not seen to be wayward in positing past-within-past.
- (4) Responses from Indian schools and schools abroad (including Eton and Harrow) show that teaching (and learning) of the issues raised (namely, those referred to in the first section of 'Introduction') greatly varies. In the matter of highlighting the non-occurrence or non-factuality of any of the past events, the informants are, however, in total accord. They avoid the simple past + before + past perfective or past perfective + before + past perfective structure, and rely either on the use of the simple past throughout or on other convenient paraphrases instead. This unison in the approach indeed challenges the existence of the 'paradoxical' past perfective at the pragmatic level.
- (5) The 'overuse' of the past perfective is not so much "one of the salient characteristics of many varieties of Indian English" as Comrie (1985 : 69) suggests.

## (ii)

The suitability of a deconstructive approach towards the presentation of the past perfective (especially in before-clauses)

in grammatical texts can positively be guessed from Jacques Derrida's insistence that deconstruction is "a process, an activity of reading, irreducible to concept or method" (Norris : 1987 : 27) and that "deconstruction is the vigilant seeking out of those 'aporias', blindspots or moments of self-contradiction where a text involuntarily betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless constrained to mean" (ibid. : 19, Norris's emphases). Derrida himself points out in Margins (1972 : 305, quoted in Norris : 1987 : 24) :

It (deconstruction) demands that one become engaged in it without endlessly circling round the form of these texts, that one decipher the law of their internal conflicts, of their heterogeneity, of their contradictions .....

In every text there is always a possibility for the writer to be lost at moments in self-contradictions or in presuppositions. As Derrida (1967, trans. 1976 : 157-8) explains:

... the writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. And reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language he uses.

Derrida's own reading of the text of Rousseau shows how Rousseau is caught unawares in the tangle of self-contradictions. In his treatment of the origin of music Rousseau points out that melody which is the natural, spontaneous impulse in music gradually degenerates into harmony which is only skilful and sophisticated arrangement of musical notes. But he painfully betrays the gap between his rhetoric and his logic as he states that melody "has its principle in harmony, since it is an harmonic analysis which gives the degrees of the scale, the chords of the mode, and the laws of the modulations, the only elements of singing" (quoted in Norris : 1987 : 108). This prompts Derrida (1967, trans. 1976 : 229) to say that Rousseau "declares what he wishes to say", but "he says or describes that which he does not wish to say" (Derrida's emphases). Derrida finds almost the same blindspot in the text of Plato. Plato, who condemns writing as somewhat degenerated form of speech and to whom writing is not "gnesios" but "a bastard" (Derrida : 1972, trans. 1981 : 148), only slips into self-contradiction as he states in Phaedrus :

- Phaedrus - What sort of discourse have you  
now in mind, and what is its origin?
- Socrates - The sort that goes together with  
knowledge and is written in the  
soul of the learner.

(Quoted in Derrida : 1972, trans. 1981:  
148)

Derrida notes this involuntary contradiction in Plato and points out that

... it is not only less remarkable here that the so-called living discourse should suddenly be described by a 'metaphor' borrowed from the order of the very thing one is trying to exclude from it, the order of its simulacrum.

(ibid. : 149)

What these citations from Derrida suggest is that he does not attempt deconstruction on the basis of the dual role of the referent, but pinpoints his deconstructive argument to catch the "internal conflicts" on the basis of the one - to - one relation between the signifier and the signified.

A self-contradiction or blindspot or an aporia of this type can be traced in several areas of English grammatical texts as well. (One such area taken up by the recent major studies in the modern English language — for example, by Huddleston (1984) — is the word classes in English or, to use a familiar phrase, the parts of speech in English). The way the English past perfective has been presented in grammatical texts seems to have involved self-contradiction or blindspot. Even the monumental Comprehensive Grammar (Quirk et al : 1985) seems to remain, on a careful study, self-interrogating in the matter of describing the use of the past perfective in different sentence structures and revealing its possible implications. In their interpretations of the use of the

past perfective, most grammarians often tend to go outside the text of given sentences, but, as Derrida has pointed out, "Il n'y a pas de hors - texte" — "There is no 'outside' to the text" (Derrida : 1967, trans. 1976 : 158).

With these preliminary remarks we may now turn to the texts of some celebrated authors to see how the use of the past perfective often invites semantic problems. We shall also take up the texts of some top grammarians in order to see how far the theories relating to the past perfective go beyond what is provided in a given sentence and in what ways the blindspots or contradictions remain hidden in the theories.

Language, as Saussure puts it, "is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and acoustic images" (quoted in Culler 1986 : 30). But this attachment of meanings to the signs which we may call the relationship between the signifier and the signified is always arbitrary in nature, and the signification rests on differentiation. As for example, the signified of 'cat' is not what is signified by 'bat' only because the signifier 'cat' differs from the signifier 'bat', but this is arbitrary since it is not possible to justify why 'cat' is 'cat' and not something else. This is true of all signifiers except for the onomatopoeic words. The cry of a crow is 'caw' and it is different from 'crow' not because it simply differs, but because of the fact that the

signifier 'caw' resembles the sound a crow produces as opposed to the sound 'crow' produced by a cock. This apart, the signifier - signified relation is arbitrary. This arbitrariness is very much patent in the words used as auxiliary verbs. These are made to 'signify' in association with the main verbs. For example, in 'I shall do it' the auxiliary 'shall' in isolation does not signify anything. It is in itself semantically void, but it is made to help the main verb 'do' signify further by the syntactical order of the sentence structure. Or, it is made to be an indication for semantic signification of the main verb 'do'. There is thus an "excess of the syntactic over the semantic" (Derrida : 1972, trans. 1981 : 221). The point may be best explained by what Derrida has said of the word 'between' :

The word 'between' has no full meaning of its own. Inter acting forms a syntactical play; not a categoem, but a syncategoem : what philosophers from the Middle Ages to Husserl's Logical Investigations have called an incomplete signification.

(ibid.)

This is seen to be equally true of 'has' or 'have' used to form the present perfective. But the semantic emptiness of the auxiliary verbs is all the more reflected in 'had' forming the past perfective — and especially in the past perfective in a before-clause.

A diachronic study of the use of the past perfective reveals that the Old English form 'that which he before said' in the usage gradually gave way to 'that which he had said' (Jespersen : 1924 : 262). Here the signifier 'had', used as an auxiliary to the main verb 'said', is made to signify what is signified by 'before' in the Old English form — 'that which he before said'. But neither of the two signifiers ('before' and 'had') can signify each other, and thus the problematising substitution of 'had' for 'before' in a sentence to denote a remote past only overtakes the logic of sense. And, naturally, the use of 'had' in the before-clause often creates disturbing and contradictory effects as is evident from the following extract from R.A. Scott - James (1958 rpt : 26) :

"Before the golden age of Greek literature had come to an end the main problem of criticism had already been settled". Quite unawares, the writer is here exposing a conflict between his intention and description, his rhetoric and logic. The text here suffers from an indeterminacy of meaning as to which event preceded which. Perhaps because of this problematic replacement of 'before' by 'had' (as in 'that which he had said') in the case of a 'past of a past', the orthodox grammarians have put much restriction on the use of the past perfective, and Nesfield (1953 : 178-9) thus goes so far as to say : "The past perfect ought never to be used at all except to show the priority of one past event to another".

But despite this sort of prescription, the problem continues, and that it does is clear from the following sentence from Long (1982 : 245) which cannot but draw one's attention to the problematic 'had' in a before-clause :

At fifty years of age, and before Jeremy Collier had driven his dramas from the stage, Dryden turned from dramatic work to throw himself into the strife of religion and politics, writing at this period his numerous prose and political treatises.

Now, no history of English literature would claim that Jeremy Collier's action preceded Dryden's turning from dramatic work. And that surely Long as a historian, too, does not think so is evident from the chronological table he furnishes at the end of the chapter. But the rub here is that the position of 'had' in the before-clause complicates the meaning of the sentence—the 'text' — beyond its intention and sense of logic.

Even Jespersen (1945 : 56 fn) is seen to have indulged in a similar sort of tensing away of time when he writes : "This was written before Schücking ... had called in question". The chronological arrangement of events that the sentence intends to convey is :

1st event : This was written.

2nd event : Schücking called in question.

since Jespersen just cannot mean it to be the other way round. And if he cannot, the past perfective ('had called in question') definitely damages the meaning present to the consciousness of the writer at the moment of signifying the event. Quirk (see Appendix I), however, comes forward to defend Jespersen with the idea of the presence of an "unexpressed reporting clause" in Jespersen's sentence. Quirk's opinion is that the sentence should be read in the following way: "This was written before (I learned that) Schücking ... had called in question .... Maybe Quirk is here overleaping the boundary of the text and slips into an 'aporia' of presupposition. But even if one is allowed to go beyond the text, even if the presupposition of the existence of a third event ('I learned that') is taken for granted, the situation does not really improve. For, in that case the chronological arrangement of the events would be :

- 1st event - This was written .
- 2nd event - Schücking called in question.
- 3rd event - I learned that.

And under no circumstances can "Schücking called in question" be the first event denoting the remotest past. This then boils down to the fact that the removal of 'had' could have saved the situation without seeking help from the presupposition.

In his Modern English Grammar, Jespersen (1931 : 83) is caught, to take a phrase from Derrida (1972, trans. 1981 : 20), in the

"dehiscence between writing and wanting - to - say (vouloir - dire )" when he comments on the use of 'had' in when - clause:

In the following two quotations, the use of the pluperfect in the when - clauses, where the simple preterit would have been normal, seems to have been induced by the pluperfect in the main sentence : Hardy R 374 when his mind had been weaker his heart had led him to speak out | Rose Macaulay P S When they had been little they had watched each other's plates with hostile eyes.

If 'the simple preterit' is normal, then the pluperfect (that is, the past perfective) is just the opposite; and if 'had' in the when -clause "seems to have been induced by the pluperfect in the main clause", then it is not a signifier at all. But Jespersen seems to impose on the lack, the void in 'had' in the when - clause the value of a signifier though what he wants to say about it is clear from the statement that "the simple preterit would have been normal". Thus, in his commentary on 'had' in the when-clauses of the sentences as quoted in the extract, Jespersen inevitably — to borrow Derrida's (1972, trans. 1981 : 20) comment on Rousseau — "describes what he does not want to say".

In his deconstruction of Plato, Derrida (1972, trans. 1981: 159) questions :

... why Plato, while subordinating or condemning writing, should have written so much ... indicting writing in writing, lodging against it that complaint (graphē) whose reverberations even today have not ceased to resound.

and comes to the conclusion that

This 'contradiction', which is nothing other than the relation - to - self of diction as it opposes itself to scription, as it chases itself (away) in hunting down what is properly its trap — this contradiction is not contingent.

What Derrida means to say here is equally true of Henderson (1954 : 53) who uses the simple past (in passive voice) in both the head clause and the before-clause while explaining the past perfective but employs the past perfective + before + simple past pattern in the example he gives in support of his explanation:

The past perfect tense denotes that one action was finished before another action was begun ...

'He had left the house before you telephoned'.

A Derridian might ask why Henderson uses in the same breath the simple past (in the passive voice) in both the clauses of a sentence, and the past perfective for the anterior past in the example he gives. Evidently, Henderson here suffers from contradiction and that is what Derrida (1972 trans. : 1981 : 158) calls the simultaneous affirmation of the being - outside of the outside and of its injurious intrusions into the inside".

Quirk et al (1985 : 1020) make the issue all the more complicated. They cite the following four examples

I saw him before he saw me [11]

I had seen him before he saw me [12]

I saw him before he had seen me [13]

I had seen him before he had seen me [14]

with this opinion that "These four sentences seem to be equivalent in meaning". The very word 'seem' registers strong tentativeness and we may say that Quirk et al are not sure of the sense of logic that the sentences convey. On one occasion Quirk et al (1985 : 196) think that "... the past perfective does not have to refer to a more remote time than referred to by the simple past", and support the interchangeability of the past perfective and the simple past in sentences with after- clause. They, however, remain silent about similar sentences with before-clause. Then they cite four examples of before-clause — each of which is different in structure from another — to point out that "these four examples seem to be equivalent in meaning". The conclusions they draw are that

Sentence [13] appears to be paradoxical in that the second in the succession of events is marked with the past perfective, contrary to what we have noted above in after - and when - clauses. The explanation ... is that the before-clause in [13], and perhaps also in [14], may be non-factual : that is to say, the event in the before-

clause may not have taken place ('He did not get a chance to see me because I evaded him').

(1985 : 1020)

So what we find Quirk et al doing here is simply this : they begin by saying that sentence [13] seems to be at a par in meaning with the other three sentences, but rush in to the conclusion that "sentence [13] appears to be paradoxical" owing to the use of the past perfective in the before - clause. The explanation they offer is that "the before - clause in [13], and perhaps also in [14], may be non-factual" (emphases mine; note the tone of tentativeness). Words like 'seem', 'perhaps' and "may be" indeed make the conceptual analysis of the past perfective by Quirk et al pretty inconclusive and so unhelpful. That any deconstructive reading of a text cannot simply overlook this type of apparently unimportant words is made clear by Norris (1987 : 111-2) when he says:

But what Rousseau wants to think and what his texts actually say are two very different matters. And this difference is there to be read in the play of grammatical moods and tenses ('would have', 'might yet be', 'would always have been' and so forth) which mark Rousseau's discourse at certain crucial points in his argument.

And, looking back to Quirk et al's (1985 : 1020) treatment of the past perfective, we may venture to say that the cohabitation of

assumptions with critical motifs reveals the Comprehensive Grammar text (Quirk et al : 1985 : 1020) as a sort of "rhetorical operation rather than a solid foundation", to quote a phrase from Culler (1979 : 171).

Geoffrey Leech, in a letter (see Appendix II) to the present author fully endorses the possibility of the non-factual past perfective in before - clauses as presented in Section 14.27 of Quirk et al (1985 : 1020) and does not at all see how the problematising drift in the diction puts the concept of non-factuality there on a fluid state instead of a solid base. To make his point clear Leech, in the letter just referred to, brings in the example "He stopped the ball before it had reached the boundary" (see Appendix II), and points out that "the past perfect indicates non-fulfilment". This in his view is synonymous with "the hypothetical past perfect". He further points out that "the same meaning, in this case, could be expressed by the past simple or by the use of 'could' : ... 'He stopped the ball before it reached the boundary' (where non-fulfilment is required by the context) and 'He stopped the ball before it could reach the boundary' ". So, the original example, according to Leech, may be replaced by two other versions of which we will, for our purpose, leave out the alternative in which 'could' is used and take up the one wherein the simple past is used. And in doing so we get the following pair of alternatives :

(a) He stopped the ball before it had reached the boundary.

(b) He stopped the ball before it reached the boundary.

The basic point in the sentences, according to Leech, is the non-fulfilment of action in the before-clauses. But he adds a point — "where non-fulfilment is required by context" — in parenthesis when he recasts the sentence with only the simple past in the before - clause. This means that it is the context that determines the non-fulfilment in the before - clause without the past perfective, and that the past perfective in the before - clause of the original sentence determines its non-fulfilment, without depending on the context. But, in actuality, in both the versions the non-fulfilment of action in the before-clause is determined by the context. For, the ball is stopped first, and there is no question of its reaching the boundary. Thus the non-fulfilment of the action in the before-clause in this case is dependent on the head-clause, no matter whether the before-clause is in the past perfective or in the simple past.

In his interpretation of the text of the two versions of the same implication Leech therefore tries to bring in a preconceived notion which the texts of the sentences disown. Leech's analysis evidently suffers from an 'aporia' of presupposition and thus "bears within itself the disruptive potential of a deconstructive

reading", to borrow a phrase from Norris (1983 rpt. : 48).

Declerck (1979 b : 728) suffers from what may be called a semantic slippage when he answers his rhetorical question:

What then is the difference between a past tense and a past perfect in before - clause? For one thing, the past perfect lacks the implicature of realized action which goes along with the past tense. Thus (58) The general tortured his prisoners before he had interrogated them leaves us quite uninformed as to whether the prisoners were subsequently interrogated or not. Secondly, unlike the use of the past tense, the use of the past perfect somehow reminds us of the alternative state of affairs, i.e. of what did not happen but could have happened. Thus, besides expressing explicitly that the general tortured his prisoners first, sentence (58) somehow makes us think of the alternative order of events i.e. of the fact that it would have been possible to interrogate the prisoners before torturing them. (Emphases mine)

On a careful reading of the passage it becomes clear that the 'text' of the above interpretation questions its very construction. If the sentence cited as an example leaves one quite un-informed

of the action in the before - clause, one may question how the same sentence alternatively reminds one of what did not happen (which means a definite information about the action) but could have happened. Further, with regard to the first implication, Declerck puts the action in the before - clause (i.e. the event of interrogation) in the second position on the time-scale ("whether the prisoners were subsequently interrogated or not"), but he reverses its position as he speaks of the alternative implication ("it would have been possible to interrogate the prisoners before torturing them"). There is thus, to borrow Norris's (1987:188) words about what Derrida finds in Plato, "a constant oscillation of meaning" in the text of Declerck's commentary on the use of the past perfective in a before - clause. It is not hard to see that this oscillation has, in Norris's (ibid.) phrase again, "undermined any straightforward univocal reading" of Declerck's text.

What Declerck is doing here is simply hunting meaning for 'had' in a before - clause. And, indeed, if he had been the framer of the sentence he cites as an example, he would not have had a definite, communicable meaning for it in mind. "The notion of meaning" is something that is "present to the consciousness of the speaker, which is then expressed through signs or signals : meaning is what the speaker 'has in mind' at the crucial moment" (Culler : 1979 : 162). None can be sure of what exact meaning Declerck is seeking to invest the past perfective with in the before - clause

of his example ('The general tortured his prisoners before he had interrogated them').

Equally unconvincing is Declerck's (1979 b : 730 - 1) contention that the examples

(67) I concealed myself before he  
had seen me.

(68) The messenger was killed before he  
had delivered the message.

(69) The witness disappeared before the  
inspector had heard him.

(70) The surgeon started operating  
before the patient had been  
anaesthetized.

(ibid. : 730)

are cases "similar to traditional examples of a modal past perfect" such as

(71) I wished John had opened the door.

(72) John behaved as if he had been  
there himself.

(ibid. : 731)

The point Declerck overlooks here is that modal sentences are modal not for the tense - factor but for some other signifiers (such as 'wish', 'as if', 'as though' etc.) signifying the mood. Declerck's (71) and (72) carry with them such signifiers as 'wished' and 'as if' which indeed propel the sentences towards

being modal or hypothetical. These signifiers are markedly absent from the examples (67) — (70). Declerck actually is supplementing here signification to what is in essence deficient in it, and in so doing he unwittingly slips into a 'blindspot', an 'aporia'.

What the fore-going discussion reveals is that it is a trifle arbitrary to say that a before - clause with the past perfective signifies non-factuality. A deconstructive analysis of the sentence "I saw him before he had seen me" shows that none of the signifiers in the before - clause signifies non-factuality. It also shows that the signified ('non-factuality') is claimed to have evolved out of what ('before', 'had seen') does not in any way signify to that effect. There thus emerges a gap between the signifier and the signified if we are in quest of 'non-factuality' in the simple past + before + past perfective or the past perfective + before + past perfective structure. And that is inter alia what this thesis purports to establish.