

## CHAPTER - IV

This chapter looks into the puzzling phenomenon that, although before implies that the head clause activity is anterior to the activity referred to in the before-clause, sometimes a past perfect tense occurs in the time clause as well as in the head clause : (a) I had seen him before he saw me, (b) I saw him before he had seen me. These two sentences are from Jespersen (1931 : 82). Although Jespersen does not say anything very clearly, he seems to suggest that these two structures are interchangeable. Even more complicated is his contention in The Philosophy of Grammar (1924 : 262) that He came before I had written the letter may mean either I finished writing the letter after he had come or I wrote the letter after he had come.

There are only two or three works by grammarians and linguists, including the monumental Comprehensive Grammar by Quirk et al (1985), that only touch upon this problem, but do not offer a satisfactory explanation. Only Declerck's article (1979 b) concentrates on the problem of the past perfective, but, as we will see soon, his solutions are not wholly satisfactory. The other writers taking interest in the use of had after before are Meyer-Myklestad (1967) and Edgren (1971). Meyer-Myklestad (1967 : 169) notes that Jespersen's examples (a) and (b) are 'striking' but limits himself to observing that "there is a certain latitude of usage as regards their respective tense sequence". Edgren (1971 : 133-4) handles the problem this way:

A perfect past form indicating factual action was used in a number of before-clauses linked with a simple past form in the head clause. As a result of this combination the head clause activity was apprehended as occurring suddenly or unexpectedly early.

Edgren illustrates her remark with examples like the following, drawn from a corpus : But before he had picked up his glasses, Gilbert seized his sleeve. She generalizes (1971 : 233) that

structures of this type are not used in order to give matter-of-fact information about the temporal relationship between two actions but employed as a stylistic means of expressing that the action of the head clause occurs unexpectedly early or rapidly.

She, however, leaves unexplained how this special semantic effect can be produced.

It is only Declerck (1979 b) who suggests a solution of the problems that this peculiar structure of the past perfective seems to generate. We will discuss Jespersen (1924), (1931) and (1945), Quirk et al (1985), as well as the present author's correspondence with Quirk and Leech on the use of had after before in the first section of this chapter, and in the second Declerck (1979b).

## (i)

Our general awareness of the past perfective with before clause (past perfect + before + simple past = The patient had died before the doctor came) surely faces a jolt as we come across constructions like 'He saw me before I had seen him' and 'He had seen me before I had seen him' . Although not so much in vogue as the past perfect + before + simple past or the simple past + before + simple past sequence, this pattern (simple past + before + past perfect) is not altogether in disuse, particularly in remembrance of things past. Here is Hardy (1974 : 217) engaged in positing past within past:

" 'That outer loose lock of hair wants tidying',  
he said, before she had moved or spoken" --- (A)

If Hardy's English is to be taken with a grain of salt, no such liberty can be taken with Jespersen's (1945 : 56f):

"This was written before Schücking ... had called  
in question ...." (= "I wrote this before ...",  
to make it Active Voice) --- (B)

If Hardy is too remote and Jespersen too pedantic, Alistair Maclean (1976 : 77) is there to show how the past perfect + before + simple past sequence and the simple past + before + past perfect sequence could be yoked together by violence:



The equation is somewhat baffling. The second graphical model (C ---- ) turns 'before' into a dubious tool to handle in the pluperfect. The model does here what Shakespeare's Polonius wished to do in other matters: "By indirection find direction out". It is difficult to see why the before clause should be made so esoteric when 'after' could do the job very easily and competently?

The first model (---<sub>C</sub>---), it is evident, may be applicable to a prolonged action like 'writing the letter' interrupted by another action like 'his coming'. But it fails to work where there are two separate points of actions. The act of writing a letter and that of seeing a person are not of the same order. And application of these models to examples (A), (B) and (C) would result in the bizarre.

Taking a different stand, Quirk et al (1985 : 1020) tentatively postulate that 'had' after 'before' makes the before-clause non-factual : "that is to say, the event in the before-clause may not have taken place". 'The patient died before the doctor had come' or 'The patient had died before the doctor had come' would thus imply that the doctor did not at all come. This interpretation goes well with examples (A) and (C) but miserably fails in the case of (B): it is impossible to believe that Jespersen wishes us to take that Schücking did not "call in question".

The limitation of the explanation given in the Comprehensive Grammar forces Randolph Quirk to approach the issue from another angle wherein he makes use of unexpressed reporting clauses. Thus he recasts "I saw him before he had seen me" into "I saw him before [I heard later that] he had seen me" (see Appendix - I). This route avoids the hurdle of non-factuality, but winds up in a pitfall. The bracketed section shapes the succession of events into the following:

1st event — He had seen me

2nd event — I saw him

3rd event — I heard later (of the 1st).

All the events are factual here, giving out a meaning quite different from the one suggested by Quirk et al (1985 : 1020).

Quirk's suggestion that example (B) be read as "This was written before [I learned that] Schucking ... had called in question ..." (see Appendix - I) once again brings in chaos ; we get a paraphrase that would hardly have obtained Jespersen's sanction. For all practical purposes, Jespersen must mean at least

1st event — This was written .

2nd event — Schucking ... called in question .

3rd event — I learned (later of the 2nd).

and not

1st event — Schücking ... called in question.

2nd event — This was written.

3rd event — I learned (later of the 1st).

Apropos of Jespersen's sentence, one then feels tempted to call in question the grammar in the sentence. The 'time', one might say, is out of 'joint' here; and the great grammarian of Elsinore might well have set it right if he had written: "This had been written before Schucking ... called in question ...".

The unsure and complicated position of the simple past + before + past perfect sequence takes a peculiar turn with the example Professor Geoffrey Leech cites (in a letter to the present author) in support of his claim that "the account in the Comprehensive Grammar, section 14.27, is substantially correct": "E.g. in 'He stopped the ball before it had reached the boundary' the past perfect indicates non-fulfilment. It is, in fact, in my view, the hypothetical past perfect" (see Appendix - II). Leech's example, despite his explanation, raises a question: how does 'He stopped the ball before it had reached the boundary' (a) semantically differ from 'He had stopped the ball before it reached the boundary' (b)? For one thing, (b) is expressly indicating the non-occurrence of the event in the before-clause. And if (b) is really doing so, (a) seems to be superfluous. Besides, if only

(a) offers non-fulfilment, what else is there to expect from (b). Can we say, (b) implies that first he stopped the ball, and then it (the ball) reached the boundary — just as we may take 'The patient had died before the doctor came' to imply that first the patient died, and then the doctor came? The question of hypothesis or non-fulfilment seems to be valid in constructions comprising two separate/independent past events. And if "one effect of the past + before + past perfective sequence is to imply independence of the two events" (See Appendix - I), Professor Leech's example does not hold good simply because the movement ('reaching') of the ball is contingent upon the action of 'he' ('his stopping the ball').

What the two sections of this chapter establish is that the simple past + before + past perfective structure (i.e. the 'paradoxical' past perfective) is dangerously susceptible to more than one semantic interpretation.

(ii)

The most intensive and detailed study of the so-called 'paradoxical' past perfective has been made by Renaat Declerck (1979b) in his article entitled 'Tense and Modality in English Before Clauses' wherein he looks into as many as 155 examples both his own and the ones used by others. The purpose of the paper, as

Declerck (1979b : 720) himself declares at the outset, is "to draw attention to a number of apparent problems in connection with the use of tenses in before-clauses and to suggest a theory in which these problems are automatically solved". The problems discussed are indeed important, but despite Declerck's worthy efforts his theory has not been able to solve all the problems.

Drawing upon Generative Semantics, Declerck makes a study of the past simple and the past perfective in before-clauses from two viewpoints — non-modal and modal. Since the present study looks into the position of the past perfective in grammar and usage, we will consider Declerck's examination of the past perfective (in the before-clause) only. Gleaning relevant material from Declerck's examples and analyses, we have the following important points to make in relation to our study.

A. Declerck's contention that

(131) I took away the book before John read it.  
differs from

(132) I took away the book before John had read it.  
in that (132), but not (131), expresses completeness of the activity, thus leaving open the possibility that John had already read part of the book when I took it away from him.

(ibid. p. 739)

does not seem to correspond to his earlier observation that the subclause of "I spoke to Mary before John had spoken to her" does not "exclude the possibility that John spoke to Mary later on" (ibid, p. 732) because we are not told anything about a structure like "I spoke to Mary before John spoke to her". Besides, Declerck does not examine the difference, if any, that would come in if the head clauses had the past perfective ("I had taken ...." and "I had spoken ...."). Furthermore, if we juxtapose Declerck's analyses of the examples "I took away the book before John had read it" (ibid., p. 739) and "Mary burnt the letter before her father had read it" (ibid. p. 734) we are forced to conclude that they have contradictory conclusions. Evidently Declerck's attention in general is focussed on the theory that "mental conceptions are propositionally formed even if they are not actually uttered in the form of a direct speech sentence" (ibid. p. 734) and that "a ('non-normal') shift from direct speech to indirect speech is a grammatical means of expressing that the proposition corresponds with a mental conception that does not apply to the real world but reflects a state of affairs imagined by the subject". (ibid. p. 734).

The obvious danger of basing analyses on such a theory is that an unending number of models may crop up. The threat of this danger is clearly seen in Declerck's explanation of the two sentences : "The workers stopped striking before the situation came to a head" and "The workers stopped striking before the situation

had come to a head". Of the former he says, "... unreality can be expressed by a past tense ... when the head clause activity is performed with the purpose of preventing the situation expressed in the before-clause ...". As regards the latter, he postulates that "If the situation in the before-clause is not conceived of as something that must be avoided but, for example, as a possible explanation of the activity indicated in the main clause, unreality has to be expressed by a past perfect." What is puzzling here is that we are getting two possible models for non-factuality — models that fail to explain the semantics of the following (and many other possible) sentences : "The patient died before the doctor came" and "The patient died before the doctor had come". The same may be said about Declerck's analysis that "... 'John died before the doctor arrived' expresses that John died before it was a fact that the doctor arrived, whereas 'John died before the doctor had arrived' expresses that John died before it was a fact that the doctor was there" (ibid. p. 739). It is very difficult indeed to see the difference between 'the doctor's arrival' and 'the doctor's being there' (underlining mine). The doctor's 'non-arrival' and the doctor's 'not being there' convey qualitatively the same notion of non-factuality.

B. By way of explaining "the seemingly illogical use of past perfect indicative forms in before-clauses" (ibid. p. 729), Declerck advances the following arguments:

"The psychological factors that occasioned the person in question to imagine the situation are the same as we have observed for the traditional cases of modal indicative forms : either the situation is conceived of as a possibility, as something that could have happened or which someone had expected to happen ... or it is visualized by the person in question as something he is afraid of or which he wishes to prevent ... or the situation corresponds with an intention, plan, hope or wish .... In each case the conception which enters the mind of the person who expects, fears, wishes etc. it to become true corresponds with a direct speech proposition involving a present perfect expressing anteriority, resultativeness or completeness". (ibid. p. 730).

In explaining the sentence "I concealed myself before he had seen me", Declerck thus says:

".... The anxious thought that crossed my mind when I spotted the man I wanted to avoid was 'He has seen me ! ' (probably with the resultative implication of 'He knows I am here', 'He will attack me' etc.)" (ibid. p. 730).

It can, however, be shown that the cognitive structure (mental conception) underlying the before-clause is not always representable as a direct speech proposition containing a present perfect. For example, when Jespersen (1945 : 56 fn) writes, "This was written before Schucking ... had called in question ...." (already discussed at length in the first section of this

chapter), the cognitive structure underlying the before-clause does not depend on the psychological factors Declerck invokes. It is really impossible to indicate a relevant direct speech proposition containing a present perfect.

C. Declerck invites unnecessary complications when he says he uses the term 'counterfactual' ('unreal', 'contrary to fact') in a relative sense and not in the absolute sense in which it is normally used in linguistic literature. In the absolute sense a clause is counterfactual if it refers to an event that did not occur at all. In the relative sense, a subclause is counterfactual if it expresses that an event that could conceivably happen did not happen or had not yet happened at the time of the event of the main clause. Since the context, before or after a sentence, can easily establish whether a particular event takes place at all or not, the nonfactuality of an event, when taken in a relative sense, only defers the possibility leaving the reader in suspense which can be driven away only by further statements. And if further statements or propositions are needed for the sake of clarification, the use of nonfactuality on relative terms either becomes useless or superfluous. For example, in "The patient died before the doctor had come", it is easier to accept that the doctor did not come at all than to believe that the speaker intends to mean that the doctor turned up, say, much later. This kind of suspension of judgement is rather seen in a construction like "The patient had died before the doctor came" where we cannot be sure that the doctor really turned up later.

D. Finally, Declerck does not seem to consider the difference between bipartite and tripartite structures. By 'bipartite' structure we mean a sentence like "I saw him before he had seen me", where reference is made to only two agents : 'I' and 'he'; and by 'tripartite' structure we would mean a sentence like "I spoke to Mary before John had spoken to her" (Declerck : 1979b : 732) where we have three agents : 'I', 'Mary' and 'John'. Declerck claims that "I spoke to Mary before John had spoken to her" does "exclude the possibility that John spoke to Mary later on", but does not see the possibility that "I had spoken to Mary before John had spoken to her" would imply the same. In other words, Declerck does not make clear the difference between the role of modal before - clause in a tripartite sentence and that in a bipartite sentence.

E. Part of Declerck's examination of non-modal use of the past perfective in before-clause, too, is questionable. Drawing a difference between "John told me the news before I read it in the newspaper" and "John had told me the news before I read it in the newspaper", he remarks that the anteriority relation in the former "does not necessitate the use of a past perfect in the main clause because it is sufficiently clear from the conjunction" (ibid. p. 723) while in the latter "the past perfect in the main clause not only denotes the anteriority relation explicitly but also has the effect of implying resultativeness: John had told me the news is in fact equivalent to 'I was acquainted with the news' " (ibid.). Now, Leech (1991 : 29)

as well as West and Kimber (1957 : 126), as we have seen, suggest that these two structures are interchangeable. Besides, the interpretation of resultativeness or completeness holds little in sentences like "The patient died before the doctor came" and "The patient had died before the doctor came". Moreover, we may question, what is 'complete' in Declerck's example 'John had been in Egypt before I went there', and how valid is his differentiation between 'John had been in Egypt before I went there' and 'John was in Egypt before I went there' ? In his opinion, the difference is due to the fact that the former "implies John was no longer in Egypt when I went there" (Declerck : 1979b : 723), while the latter does not. But, is it not that the difference is due to the nature of the verb "was" (i.e. a form of 'be' verb) so that "was" does not function like "told" just as "had been" does not function like "had told" ? Hence, the postulate that "the past perfect in the main clause at least implies completeness of the activity" (ibid.) is not attended by a happy and strong example here so as to form a model. For what can be said of the difference between

'John had gone to Egypt before I went there'

and

'John went to Egypt before I went there'

in terms of 'completeness' ?

Even more arbitrary seems Declerck's analysis of the sentence, "John had told me the news before I had read it in the newspaper" (ibid. p. 723). He argues that in this sentence "where a past perfect is employed in both head clause and subclause, the point of orientation must be established by the preceding sentence" (ibid. p. 725). What Declerck means to say is that an appropriate narrative context is required for this type of sentences. He provides the sentence with a possible narrative context in the following manner : "(I was very angry with John.) He had told me the news before I had read it in the newspaper (as I would have preferred to read it in the paper first)". If we are to comply with Declerck's view, we would say that the non-factuality or modal use of the past perfective in the before-clause gets cancelled because of the presence of a past perfective in the head clause. But we have seen that Quirk et al (1985 ; 1020) regard this type of structure as well as the one like "He told me the news before I had read it in the newspaper" as 'non-factual'. Things get even more complicated as we stumble on Declerck's following observations:

"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".

(1979b : 727)

Declerck's analysis here involves contradiction because if the past perfective lacks the implicature of realized action, 'leaving us quite uninformed', it cannot then have the capacity to remind us of "what did not happen but could have happened".