

CHAPTER - I

This introductory chapter has three sections : Section I synthesizes the research project; Section II attempts an overview of the relationship between Time and Tense; and Section III briefly traces the genesis of the past perfective in English.

I

At a time when English grammar is ceasing to be strictly 'prescriptive' and becoming increasingly 'descriptive', when almost all the linguistic concepts and apparatus are seen to shape and re-shape quite successfully what the grammarians and the linguists since Saussure would call 'traditional grammar', a study of the past perfective in English grammar and usage may not be altogether unwarranted. For the issue under discussion is challenging in more ways than one.

The past-within-past structures do raise some questions to which satisfactory answers are not available in the books on English grammar. One wonders why the Longman Dictionary (1984 : 1781-4), in its catalogue of the 'vexed points' in English grammar, has not included the problem of positing past within past. The dictionary as much as most books, foreign and Indian, on English grammar and usage has skipped the intricacies and puzzles of the past perfective. For example, A. S. Hornby's A Guide to Patterns and Usage in English (1962 : 100-3) does not explain the difference between

'after' and 'before' clauses in their relation to the past perfective and the simple past. The examples of 'paradoxical past perfect' cited in this book do not carry any explicit explanation.

Examples are better than precepts. The following examples of positing past within past show the complicated position of the past perfective and demand a detailed study of the issue:

- A. The patient died before the doctor came.
(Simple past + before + simple past)
- B. The patient had died before the doctor came.
(Past perfect + before + simple past)
- C. The patient died before the doctor had come.
(Simple past + before + past perfect)
- D. The patient had died before the doctor had come.
(Past perfect + before + past perfect)

(The last three structures are the maximal variants of the past perfective as we have it in theory and practice.)

Are A and B identical? If not, how do they differ from each other? What does C imply? Is there any difference between C and D? What structure could be adopted to imply that "the patient died but the doctor did not ultimately turn up"? How far are we to take into account such factors as 'viewpoint', 'stativeness', 'voice', etc., in judging the priority of events shown with the

help of 'before' and 'after' clauses? Can 'had' be used (as has been done in one place or two in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary) in a sentence which does not get the support of necessary contextual reference to another past event? These are some of the questions the present study takes up for discussion.

A study of this kind would be all the more useful if it steps beyond the polemics of grammar. Hence it takes into its ambit not only what the grammarians say all about the issues concerned but also present usage in creative and critical writings as well as in newspapers. Relevant corpora from the Collins Birmingham University International Database and the Survey of English Usage (University College London) have also been examined in order to get nearer to the 'reality' of the situation. A case-study of the teaching and learning of these issues both in Indian and in foreign schools (including Harrow and Eton College) has been brought in to throw important sidelights on things grammatical. Besides, very selective help is sought from the post-structural approach known as 'deconstruction' with a view to pointing to either the nature of the problem or the probable sources of the complexities. Hence such issues as 'blindspots', 'aporia of presupposition' and 'dehiscence between writing and wanting-to-say (vouloir-dire)' (Derrida : 1972, trans. 1981 ; 20) will be brought in. Besides, Derrida's imperative like "... 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 : 1976 : 157-8) will be taken into special account in looking into the paradoxical past perfective.

Along with these rather sophisticated investigations, the present study will examine the peculiar locus standi of the relevant words (like 'before', 'after', 'when', 'as soon as') in the English past perfective, and also judge the soundness of Comrie's (1985 : 69) claim that "overuse of the pluperfect, precisely to indicate remoteness without an intervening reference point, is one of the salient characteristics of many varieties of Indian English ..." as well as his formula : "pluperfect E before R before S" (1985 : 125). Finally, in reevaluating the views of the grammarians and the linguists on the past perfective, the present author's correspondence with Sir Randolph Quirk, Professor Geoffrey Leech, and Gill Francis, Senior Grammarian, Cobuild, have also been substantially used.

II

Like many other areas of English grammar, the relationship between time and tense can be approached from two different angles : traditional and modern. The former, based on the features important in Latin grammar, takes a fairly simple short-cut to characterise the relationship between time and tense. The latter, on the other hand, has rejected the "simplicity" of the former on the grounds that from the linguistic viewpoints the relationship is by no means a simple one.

What is regarded as the traditional concept of tense is based on the hypothesis that tense in language signals time:

The words TIME and TENSE must not be confused. The word TIME stands for a concept with which all mankind is familiar. It is something independent of language. The word TENSE stands for a verb form or a series of verb forms used to express a time relation. (Hornby : 1962 : 83).

It would follow from this that the present tense of a verb signals present time (that is, the activity is taking place at the time of speaking, as in Chris is going), the past tense signals past time (as in Chris went home), and so on, for the whole range of tenses we may want to set up. A modern approach, on the other hand, would endeavour to show such an hypothesis to be false. On rigorous examinations of the posited relationship, modern grammarians and linguists would raise questions like "Is there a one-to-one relation between tense and time?", "Do the tenses have any other jobs to do in language apart from signalling time relationships?" and "Are there any other ways of signalling time relationships in language apart from using the tense system?" We, however, do not have as yet any arguably perfect theory regarding the relationship between time and tense. David Crystal's (1962 : 98) remarks are important:

To take the concept 'time' and to investigate systematically all the features of a language which are part of its expression is by no means an easy task, as the

as the march of time is concerned, this diagram holds good. But the problem is : how to tense all these (and many more theoretically possible) times away? Jespersen tries to forestall the problem thus:

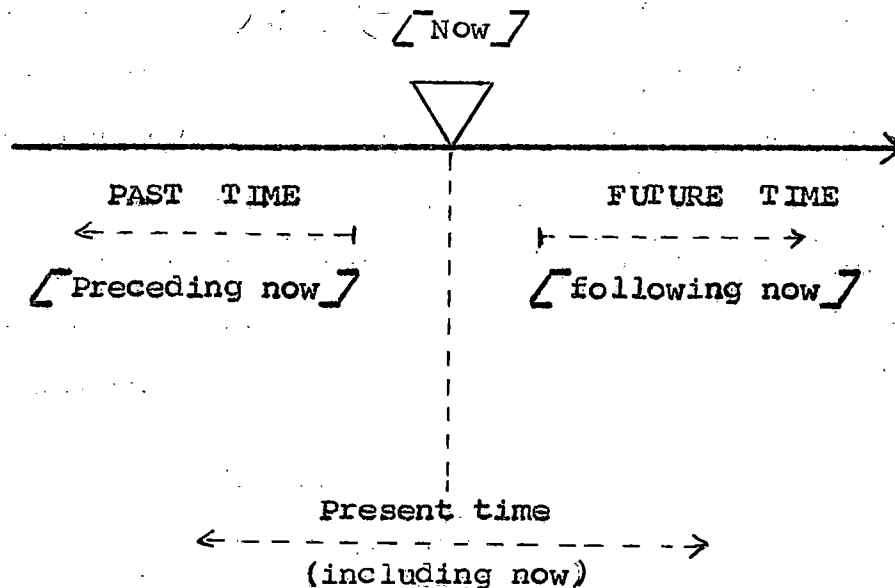
It should be conducive to clearness to have two sets of terms, one for notional time, and the other for grammatical tense, and to keep them strictly apart. This is possible in English for Section A, where we can use the term past for the time division, and preterit for the tense found, e.g. in was, drank, called; but unfortunately it is not possible to have such simple terms for the other divisions, and we shall therefore have to say present time and present tense, future time (or futurity) and future tense, whenever there is any fear of misunderstanding.

(ibid.)

And, by way of a conclusion (or a rule), Jespersen observes, "The English verb has only two tenses proper, distinguished by the form itself, namely the Present and the Preterit" (ibid., P. 3). We may note here in passim that the idea that there is no future tense in English has been widely accepted by present-day grammarians and linguists except probably Declerck (1991) and Comrie (1985).

Quirk et al (1985) perhaps represent the culmination of traditional descriptive grammar in English, and it is interesting to see how the Jespersen model undergoes a reappraisal in their hands. Quirk et al speak of three different levels on which the

terms 'present' and 'past' can be interpreted : referential level, semantic level, and grammatical level. The referential level corresponds to the Jespersen model (see ultra) : "Anything ahead of the present moment is in the future, and anything behind it is in the past" (Quirk et al : 1985 : 175). But in relating this view of time to language and, more precisely, to the meaning of verbs, "... it is useful to reformulate the threefold distinction such that 'present' is defined in an inclusive rather than in an exclusive way" (ibid, pp.175-6). That is to say, 'present' may also stretch into the past and into the future. Hence, we can say "the Taj Mahal stands by the Jamuna". This is the second or semantic level of interpretation which Quirk et al (1985 : 176) have diagrammatically put thus :



According to this interpretation, 'present' is the most general and unmarked category. Finally, 'present' and 'past' are also interpreted on a grammatical level in reference to tense. 'Future' is excluded because English has no future form of the verb ; certain grammatical constructions are capable of expressing the semantic category of future time.

The last level mentioned is seen to be of main interest to modern grammarians and linguists in search of the 'typology' of tense, i.e. establishment of the range within which languages can vary in the grammaticalised expression of location in time. Making a clear division between "the grammatical category of TENSE and the semantic category of TIME", Huddleston (1988 : 30-1) says :

There are just two tenses in English, past and present ... English has no future tense. That is to say there is no verbal category in English whose primary use is to locate in future time the situation described in the clause The will construction ... does not satisfy the conditions for analysis as a future tense. Grammatically will is a catenative, not an auxiliary — hence not the marker of a verbal category.

But Comrie (1985 : 47) seems to have some reservations about this contention:

Before abandoning the claim that English has a future tense, however, it is necessary to ask the question whether the correlation between will and future time reference in English is explainable in its entirety in terms independent of future time reference, or whether future time reference will still have to play some explicit role in determining the circumstances under which will can be used or omitted. It is remarkable that ... this question remains unanswered. We will suggest that there is indeed need to refer independently to future time reference

Any discussion of the Time-Tense relation must bring into its ambit references to aspect and modality. Aspect concerns the manner in which the verbal action is experienced or regarded (for example as completed or in progress), while mood (or 'modality' as its semantic category) relates the verbal action to such conditions as certainty, obligation, necessity, possibility, etc. In fact these three categories impinge to a great extent on each other : in particular, the expression of time present and past cannot be considered separately from aspect, and the expression of the future is closely bound up with mood. But there is one difficulty : unfortunately the terminological distinction between time and tense has "no well-established analogue in the domain of aspect : the one term 'aspect' is widely used both for a grammatical category of the verb and for the type of meaning characteristically expressed by that category" (Huddleston : 1988 : 73).

In conclusion, one can say that tense does more than signal time. That tenses have other jobs to do in language apart from telling the time alone may be obvious from the difference between the following structures:

- A. The patient died before the doctor came.
- B. The patient had died before the doctor came.
- C. The patient died before the doctor had come.
- D. The patient had died before the doctor had come.

III

For the origin and the earlier form of the past perfective or the past perfect tense, we have to turn to the genesis of the present perfect tense.

The present perfect has developed out of the present tense of transitive verbs : "I have written the letter", originally "I have the letter written", i.e. in a written state. As having the letter in a written state implies previous action, have written gradually acquired verbal force serving as a verbal form, pointing to the past and bringing it into relation with the present. Originally the Germanic past tense had a similar force, but gradually the idea of the past so overshadowed that of the present that a desire arose for a new form that would express a close relation between past and present. In early Old English

this desire found expression in the formation of the new present perfect tense.

In the original form of the English construction the past participle, as written in the sentence given above, was an objective predicate participial adjective and as a predicate had a strong stress. Even in the oldest English the participle sometimes assumed strong verbal force, transferring to the preceding noun its strong stress, since the object is usually more forcibly accented than the verb. Later, the strongly accented object was placed after the participle, in accordance with the general tendency to place strongly accented words after words with weaker stress. Thus arose a clear formal distinction between 'I have the letter written', the old present tense, and 'I have written the letter', the new perfect tense. But, as McCoard (1978 : 19) observes:

How this then went through the processes of change necessary to become the precursor of I have written the letter is a topic of some complexity; one puzzle we must confront is that there is supposed to have been a wideranging interchangeability of past tense forms in Middle English, but it is difficult to see how all the separate past tense forms could have engaged in such a free-for-all with the preterit and perfect dividing the field neatly between them at the conclusion. One or the other should have been lost in battle.

The development of the perfect tense suggested the formation of the new past perfect : 'I had written the letter'. Thus the English language "was enriched by the creation of two new tenses, the present perfect and past perfect, which were added to the two original English tenses, the present and the past" (Curme : 1931 : 358-9). The Old English 'that which he before said' gradually yielded place to 'that which he had said' (Jespersen: 1924 : 262).