CHAPTER - III

In this chapter we propose to review what some of the major theorists of Tense system in general have got to say about the past perfective in English. The first section of this chapter deals with Reichenbach's (1947) position while the second and the third with Comrie's (1985) and Smith's (1975 ?) respectively. In discussing Smith, however, we will make passing references to McCawley (1971) and Heinämäki (1974). The fourth and final section of this chapter examines some of the points made by Declerck (1991).
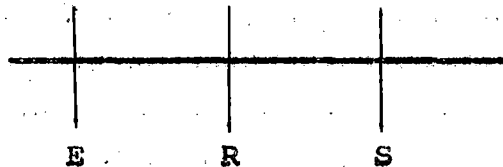
(1)

Reichenbach (1947 : 288-98) has developed a system in which three elements (primitives) are involved in describing the tenses : a speech act, an 'event', and a 'reference point'. They way these three are interrelated is illustrated with the help of the past perfective:

> Let us call the time point of the token the
> point of speech .... From a sentence like
> 'Peter had gone' we see that the time order
> expressed in the tense does not concern one
> event, but two events, whose positions are
> determined with respect to the point of speech.
> We shall call these time points the point of
> event and the point of reference. In the example
> the point of the event is the time when Peter
> went : the point of reference is a time between
> this point and the point of speech. In an

individual sentence like the one given it is
not clear which time point is used as the point
of reference. This determination is rather
given by the context of speech. (Reichenbach:1947:288)

In this theory, the meaning of the past perfect involves
reference to three different points, located in a particular
order on the line:

(The symbols E, R and S stand, respectively, for 'point of the
event', 'point of reference' and 'point of speech'.) Reichenbach
then goes on to claim that these three points are relevant to
every one of the tenses, not just to tenses such as the past
perfective or the future perfective:

In some tenses, two of the three points are
simultaneous. Thus, in the simple past, the
point of the event and the point of reference
are simultaneous, and both are before the point
of speech .... The difficulties which grammar
books have in explaining the meanings of the
different tenses originate from the fact that
they do not recognize the three-place structure
of the time determination given in the tenses.
                                (ibid, 289-90)

In Reichenbach's terminology, the words 'past', 'present' and 'future' refer to the position of R relative to S. The terms 'anterior', 'simple', and 'posterior' indicate the position of E relative to R, the word 'simple' being used for the coincidence of R and E. The traditional 'past perfect', thus, becomes in Reichenbach's hands 'Anterior past' (E - R - S, the dashes representing an interval of time) and 'past tense' or 'preterit' takes on the label 'simple past' (E, R - S, where the comma represents simultaneity).

Although Reichenbach's system has been extremely influential, it is not altogether unexceptionable. First, the 'point of reference' and the 'point of event' are somewhat infelicitous, since both reference time and event time are usually longer than a moment (point) : a term like 'interval' or 'time' would therefore be a better choice.

Secondly, Reichenbach's analysis would say that in 'I had met him yesterday' what was yesterday is the reference point, and the meeting may have occurred the day before yesterday. This kind of analysis is rather hard pressed by the simple observation that I had met him yesterday is actually ambiguous between the reading referred to above (according to which the meeting occurred before yesterday) and the interpretation on which yesterday indicates the time of the encounter. The latter interpretation is brought to the fore in This morning mother wanted me to go and see grandfather, but I told her it was not necessary because I

had met him yesterday. In this sentence yesterday refers to
the time of the encounter and does not establish the reference
point that lies between the event point and the speech point
(since the structure of the past perfect in Reichenbach's theory
is E - R - S). In the sentence just referred to, the reference
point in question is indicated by This morning. There are probably
two ways to accommodate this observation. The first is to give
up the claim that temporal adverbials can only refer to R and accept
that they can refer to either R or E. The second way out is to
assume that in a past perfect sentence like I had met him yesterday
there are two reference points, one of which is simultaneous with
the event point, while the other lies between the event point and
the point of speech.

Thirdly, and more importantly, it can be shown that
Reichenbach's claim that time adverbials refer to R proves incom-
patible with his own analysis of the past perfective. For the pur-
pose of this remark, let us consider a sentence like "I heard
yesterday that the Prime Minister had been in New York the day
before". If the past perfective in the that — clause is to be
analysed as 'E-R-S', then R must be the time indicated by yesterday,
not the time indicated by the day before, for E (the time of being
in New York) is anterior to the former time, not to the latter.
But which time is then established by the day before? Either we
will have to give up the principle that time adverbials refer to

R and not to E and say that the day before indicates the time
of E, or we will have to say that the structure of the past
perfective contains two Rs (that is, E is simultaneous with one
R ('the day before') and anterior to another ('yesterday')).

What this criticism shows up is that Reichenbach's claim that
temporal adverbials are accommodated in his structures (since
they must be taken to refer to R) is not correct. Some types of
temporal specifiers appear to refer to times that do not corres-
pond to any of the times ('points') in the Reichenbachian system.

(ii)

Viewing tense as grammaticalised expression of location in
time, Comrie (1985) proposes a theory of tense that is different
from Reichenbach's. Obviously, Comrie's model of the past perfec-
tive ('pluperfect') is also different from Reichenbach's. In
Comrie's theory, all that we need to represent the three 'absolute'
tenses (present, past and future) are two time elements—the
time of speech (S), and the time of event (E)—and three relations
(simultaneity, anteriority and posteriority). So, in Comrie's
analysis the structure of past tense is "E before S" (1985:123)
and that of the past perfective is "E before R before S" (1985:125)
or "S after R after E" (1985 : 127). Comrie's representation of
the past perfective, (or "the pluperfect", as he styles it), thus

demands that there is a reference point in the past (i.e. before the present moment), and the situation is located prior to that reference point. This representation is to be interpreted as 'E before R and R before S'. One important property of this representation is that E is located relative to R, and R is located relative to S, but there is no direct relation between E and S. Comrie forestalls one possible objection to this representation in the following way:

> Since the relation before is transitive (i.e. if X is before Y and Y is before Z, then necessarily X is before Z), one can deduce E before S from the representation of the pluperfect, but this is not part of the formal representation of the pluperfect....
>
> (1985 : 125)

It is important here to note what Comrie has to say about time adverbials and contexts in relation to what he calls 'reference point'. Comrie (1985 : 66) admits that time adverbials often establish a reference point for the past perfective but he emphasizes that "time adverbials co-occurring with the pluperfect do not necessarily establish a reference point, but may also encode the time at which the situation is located". Thus, according to Comrie, the time adverbial in a sentence like The train had already left at ten o'clock can yield two possible interpretations : the first, that ten o'clock is the reference point prior to which the train had left; the second, that ten o'clock is the

time at which the train left. In the second case, however, we have to seek the reference point elsewhere in the context. The broader context will usually make clear the intended interpretation. Even a slight change in context can change the identification of the reference point. Thus, the clause sequence _I arrived; the train had already left_ will most naturally be given an interpretation where my arrival is the past reference point relative to which the departure of the train is prior. Now, if we add another clause to these two, the interpretation gets changed : _I arrived; the train had already left before my wife arrived._ In this example, my wife's arrival in the past is more likely to be taken as the reference point prior to which the train left. Since the time relation between my arrival and my wife's arrival is left unspecified, it is not possible to relate the train's departure to my arrival chronologically. If this is taken as a narrative, then the past tenses are most likely to be interpreted as sequential :

> I arrived before my wife arrived. But since the
> train's departure takes place before my wife's
> arrival, this still leaves open whether the train
> left before my arrival, or between my arrival and
> my wife's arrival, and addition of other context
> may support any of these interpretations. These
> complexities lead Comrie (1985 ; 67) to conclude
> that "The meaning of the pluperfect is thus
> restricted to location in time before a reference
> point that is located before the present moment,
> and everything beyond this is interpretation, and
> heavily context-dependent".

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> dependent.

Comrie also discusses why the past perfective cannot always be referred to by the past simple. To the question 'Why a pluperfect?' Comrie (1985 : 67) has the following answer:

> in locating situations in time, it is necessary not only to relate situations relative to the present moment, but also to relate them chronologically to one another. A simple sequence of past tenses fails to do this, e.g. John arrived; Mary left, which leaves open whether John's arrival preceded or followed Mary's departure. Given the tendency for linear order of clauses to follow chronological order of events, the example just given is most likely to be interpreted as meaning that John's arrival took place first, then Mary's departure. If for some reason it is desired to present events in other than chronological order, the pluperfect is an ideal mechanism for indicating this, as when the previous example is changed to John arrived; Mary had left.

But it is, however, not clear why one will use John arrived; Mary had left instead of Mary left; John arrived if one is required to place the events chronologically even without using before or after. This point is important because it seeks to identify the pragmatic value of the use of the past perfective.

Bringing in the question of the present moment or current relevance, Comrie (1985 : 68) makes a two-fold distinction between the past perfective and the simple past ('remote past'):

First, the temporal location of the pluperfect
is not necessarily remote; all that is required is
a reference point intervening between the past
location of the situation referred to by the plu-
perfect and the present moment, and the intervals
involved can be infinitesimally small. Secondly,
the pluperfect does require such an intervening
reference point, while the remote past does not;
it simply indicates that a situation held at a
considerable temporal distance from the present
moment, without any need to specify any of what
filled the interval between the situation and the
present moment.

It is, again, not clear how in The patient died before the doctor
came we get the indication of "a situation held at a considerable
temporal distance from the present moment" or how in The patient
had died before the doctor came the intervals involved are
'small'.

Finally, it may be pointed out that Comrie's formula ('E
before R before S') of the past perfective does not always hold
good. The limitation of the formula becomes clear if we try to
analyse a sentence like I found out that Valerie had been in
London during the preceding week. When we look at the sentence

in question, we ascertain that, apart from the moment of speech, it refers to three different times : the time of my finding out, the time when Valerie was in London and the time referred to by during the preceding week. Comrie's analysis of the past perfective ('E before R before S') provides for only two time-points besides S. Since R is obviously the time of finding out, and E is time of Valerie's being in London, Comrie's theory fails to provide the time referred to by during the preceding week which is a time relative to which E is located.

(iii)

The past perfective is defined by McCawley as a past embedded in a past. The embedded past is not merely past with respect to the moment of coding ('MOC'); it is past with respect to that past time which is referred to by the embedding tense. For this reason, McCawley designates Past as a "relative" tense, the Present being "absolute" since it is always located temporally by the moment of coding (McCawley : 1971 : 110). McCawley never extends his theory, describing tense-embeddings within a verb phrase, to cover tense-embeddings between verb phrases generally. Smith (1975) takes McCawley's system as a base for studying the correspondence between the tense of a main clause and that of a subjoined adverbial clause. In this section, we shall briefly examine Smith's findings.

Smith tries to find a simple means of predicting the tense of embedded adverbial clauses from the tense of the matrix clause. She, in fact, holds that the tenses are, at an underlying level, the same. According to her, the adverbial tense is derived by a copying rule from the main tense. To handle cases where the main tense is "complex", she allows the copying rule to apply to "any or all of the tenses that make up the main tense" (1975 : 71). This will account for the tense-sequence in "The patient <u>died</u> before the doctor <u>came</u>", but this will exclude a construction like "The patient <u>will die</u> before he/she <u>took</u> oxygen", Unfortunately, the same principle will also rule out examples like "She <u>collapsed</u> after she <u>had heard</u> the news" where the subordinate clause has a "complex" tense containing an element not present in the main clause tense. In order to keep the copying principle intact, Smith wants to argue that the <u>have</u> (the present of <u>had</u>) in such subordinate clauses actually comes from a different source entirely, and has a meaning which is distinct from that of "copied" <u>haves</u>. Copied <u>have</u> yields a meaning of "remoteness", while independent <u>have</u> marks "anteriority", which Smith regards as "a type of perfective aspect" (1975 : 74). Anteriority indicates sequence between one event and another, while remoteness "indicates a state or event that is distant ... ⌊and has⌋ no sequential or aspectual implications" (ibid : 75). This non-sequential <u>have</u> is found, for example, in the main tense of "I <u>had known</u> him when he lived in Calcutta" where the time of <u>had known</u> is not before, but simultaneous

with _lived_. Remoteness "requires a temporal anchor other than the present" (ibid. : 76) : <u>had known</u> here suggests an unexpressed orienting time in the past (not <u>lived</u>). There are cases where both clauses contain perfects, and these are both ambiguous between anterior and remote readings. For example, we can detect four types of ambiguity in a sentence like "John had left the room when Mary had thrown the ashtray" with the following possible paraphrases :

(Remote + Remote)   J. left the room when M. threw the ashtray; all this happened before some other event.

(Anterior + Remote) J. had already left the room when M. threw the ashtray; all this was before some other event.

(Remote + Anterior) J. left the room when (after) M. had thrown the ashtray; all this was before some other event.

(Anterior + Anterior) J. had left the room at a time when M. had already thrown the ashtray.

(McCoard : 1978:201)

We can argue here that it is the ambiguity of <u>when</u> that is responsible for the different readings, which correspond to different ways of connecting various orientation points and reference points. Heinämäki (1974) observes that the interpretation of <u>when</u> depends, among other things, on the telic character of the events themselves. If one of the events is atelic, the events will always be understood as coinciding or overlapping with each other, as in "We were crossing the street when Ranjit called us". If both the events are telic, then a sequence is normally understood, as in "The bell rang when Hirak pushed the button". With this fluidity of interpretation in mind, it is not hard to imagine how the past perfective conjoined by <u>when</u> might be open to at least four readings. Thus the analysis with Remote and Anterior past perfects ignores the generality of the depen- dency of readings on pragmatic factors. The overall objection to Smith's system can be summed up in the words of McCoard (1978: 203):

> ... Smith's system will necessitate completely
> separate derivations for tense sequence that
> really seem to be mirror images .... On the other
> side of the coin, the copy rule is really odd : it
> can choose any or all of the underlying tense
> elements of the matrix clause to copy, which would
> suggest that the alternate possibilities are in
> free variation and semantically equivalent. But
> this isn't realistic ...."

(iv)

Declerck's <u>Tense in English</u> (1991) is probably the latest linguistic study of the nature and uses of the tenses in English. It elaborately discusses many problems associated with the form and use of the past perfective. Since one of the important questions we are interested in is whether the simple past tense could do the job of the past perfective, it is worthwhile to see what Declerck (1991) has to say about the issue.

Declerck maintains that "English speakers can choose between the preterit ⟨the past simple⟩ and the past perfect in the relative clause" (1991 : 64) of a sentence like "He had given her a penny from the purse which (<u>had</u>) <u>contained</u> sixty pence", and his theory is : "In sum, the use of a non-perfect tense in a <u>before</u>-clause suggests actualization" (1991 : 93). But his summing up tends to be unclear once we look into what he says about the role of time adverbials:

> What is indicated by such an adverbial is the
> distance between the actualizations of the two
> situations. The presence of such an adverbial
> thus makes clear that the past perfect situation
> did eventually take place. Because of this exam-
> ples like ⟨"John left the house long before the
> others had arrived"⟩ look better with the past
> tense in the <u>before</u>-clause. In fact, the past
> perfect ... appears to be possible only because
> the distance indicated by the measure phrase is
> very long. If it is a short time-span that is
> indicated, the past perfect is hardly acceptable."
> (1991 : 94)

Declerck points out that in "John arrived after the bomb had exploded", there is "only one anteriority relation and ... this relation is expressed twice : once by the choice of after and once by the use of the past perfect" (1991 : 109). Thus Declerck means to say that the simple past ("exploded") can do duty for the past perfect ('had exploded'). Then, why is it that one might venture to write John arrived after the bomb had exploded? According to Declerck, the reason is that "the use of the pluperfect ⌐'had exploded'⌐ is simply induced by the use of after. Using after, the speaker has an anteriority relation in mind, and this leads him to use the past perfect" (1991 : 110). Declerck's opinion is that if we want to state merely the sequence of events, we can use the simple past tense instead of the past perfective (for example, The bomb exploded before John arrived). This is true of after-clauses as well, as Declerck (1991 : 113) observes:

> The construction is used if the speaker treats
> both situations as factual and merely wants to
> state the temporal order in which they occurred.
> In my opinion, if a speaker can do this by means
> of a sentence of the form 'X before Y', it must
> also be possible for him to do it by means of a
> sentence of the form 'Y after X'.

To round off this section, as well as this chapter, we may briefly examine what Declerck says about the interchangeability between the simple past tense and the past perfective. Taking up the sentence The letter was destroyed before I had read it,

Declerck (1991 : 93) observes that it is pragmatically impossible to read a letter after its destruction and that "In such before-clauses ... the past tense can be substituted for the past perfect with no apparent difference : The letter was destroyed before I read it." It is clear here that Declerck's observation regarding the choice between the simple past and the past perfective has no affinity whatsoever with the observations of the grammarians on the same point as made clear in the preceding chapter. Another curious point to note about Declerck's analysis is his inattentiveness to such formulation as The patient had died before the doctor came and to such question as whether this could be replaced by The patient died before the doctor came. Although Declerck says that "when the head clause situation does not pragmatically exclude the subclause situation, the different tenses suggest different interpretations" (1991 : 93), he only examines the structures (a) John read the letter before I had read it and (b) John read the letter before I read it and does not bring in an orthodox structure like (c) John had read the letter before I read it. This gap, however, in Declerck's analysis forces us to deduce that Declerck probably does not want to equate structure (b) with structure (c).