

# Why the Historical Present is not the Mirror Image of Free Indirect Discourse

Corien Bary

Radboud University Nijmegen

c.bary@ftr.ru.nl

While Schlenker (2004) argues that the Historical Present and Free Indirect Discourse are each other's mirror images, this paper shows that the perspective shifts involved are of a fundamentally different nature.

**Two contexts** Schlenker (2004) introduces the distinction between two contexts, a context of thought and a context of utterance, to explain the grammaticality of the following two sentences:

- (1) Tomorrow was Monday, Monday, the beginning of another school week!
- (2) Fifty eight years ago to this day, on January 22, 1944, just as the Americans are about to invade Europe, the Germans attack Vercors.

Example (1) is a sentence in Free Indirect Discourse (FID), a narratological technique in which we read the thoughts or utterances of a character in the story, but where these thoughts/utterances are not embedded under an attitude or speech verb that explicitly attributes them to this character. Example (2) features a Historical Present (HP), a present tense used to refer to events in the past, as witnessed by the past time adverbial.

In both sentences it is clear that the indexical expressions are not to be evaluated with respect to one and the same Kaplanian context. Both the combination of *tomorrow* and a past tense in (1) and that of *fifty eight years ago to this day* and a present tense in (2) would result in a clash. Schlenker argues that these data show that we have to distinguish two contexts, a context of thought ('the point at which a thought originates') and a context of utterance ('the point at which the thought is expressed'). He continues:

The difference rarely matters in everyday life: a person's mouth is located near a person's brain, and as a result the point at which a thought is formed is not significantly different from that at which it is expressed. If we were very different creatures, we might be able to have our brain in one location and to express its thoughts in another.

Schlenker (2004:279)

Although the difference doesn't come out in everyday life, Schlenker argues that the two literary devices mentioned above, FID and the HP, do tear the two contexts apart. Here the narrator presents things as if the context of thought is significantly different from the context of utterance. In these constructions, only one of the two contexts is the actual context of the narrator, the other is a non-actual context in the story.

In FID, Schlenker argues, following Banfield (1982) and Doron (1991), the context of utterance is the actual context, i.e. the context of the narrator, but the context of thought is the context of a character in the story. The felicity of (1) is then explained as follows: tenses and pronouns are variables and as such always anchored by the context of utterance. All other indexicals, by contrast, are anchored by the context of thought. For (1) this means that the time denoted by *tomorrow* is in the future for the character (the context of thought) but in the past for the narrator (the context of utterance), resolving any impending conflict.

While the FID part of Schlenker's account has received considerable attention (e.g. Sharvit 2008, Eckardt 2014,

Maier 2015), the HP component went somewhat unnoticed (with the recent exception of Eckardt 2014). Schlenker proposes to analyze the HP as the mirror image of FID: here it's the context of utterance that is a non-actual context (in the story), while the context of thought is the actual context. Indexical expressions still having the same anchoring, this means that the present tense in (2) is evaluated with respect to a non-actual context of utterance, while the temporal adverbial *fifty eight years ago to this day* is anchored by the context of thought, which here is the actual narrator's context. As in the case of FID, this then explains the felicity of (2).

Despite its elegance, I argue that the mirror image analysis cannot be correct. I identify seven problems, starting with more conceptual ones which will then be followed by more empirical ones. I then propose an alternative in which the two are treated as fundamentally different, a major difference being that, while FID is a report, sentences with the HP are not.

**Argument 1: HP and the two contexts** Although it is clear that HPs are to be interpreted with respect to a non-actual context, there is no *intuitive* reason for a constellation in which the context of *utterance* is shifted while the context of *thought* remains the actual context. Schlenker writes:

the explanation [for the felicity of (2)] is simply that the time of the Context of Utterance  $v$  is set exactly fifty eight years before the time of the Context of Thought  $\theta$ , which yields the impression that the speaker is directly witnessing the relevant scene

Schlenker (2004:281)

Schlenker speaks about *witnessing*. Witnessing (the effect to be explained), however, is intuitively thinking at least as much as speaking, and hence the effect is not explained by shifting the context of utterance while leaving the context of thought unchanged. Recall that for Schlenker the distinction between the two contexts is not just a technical distinction. He wants to explain *why* tenses and pronouns are evaluated with respect to one context, and all other indexicals with respect to the other. For this he uses the conceptual distinction between the two contexts, one being a context of a thinker and the other a context of a speaker. For demonstratives, for example, he argues that their reference depends on the 'referential intentions of a thinking agent' which explains why they are evaluated with respect to the context of thought and hence interpreted from the character's perspective in FID.

**Argument 2: Free Indirect Speech and the two contexts** Free Indirect Speech poses a similar problem to the conceptual distinction between the two contexts. In FID (covering both Free Indirect Thought and Free Indirect Speech) the combination of a non-actual (character's) context of thought and an actual (narrator's) context of utterance is to give the impression that 'another person's thoughts are articulated through the speaker's mouth' (p. 280). But now consider (3), where the parts in italics are Free Indirect Speech:

- (3) Mr. Pomfret didn't mention references. His sole concern was the nature of her past duties. *Had she typed, had she filed, taken shorthand?* He said she would start tomorrow; *her hours were nine to five. Sorry, the pay was just minimum wage*, he said. *Also she was expected to brew the coffee; he hoped that wasn't a problem.* Of course it wasn't, Delia said brusquely, and she rose and terminated the interview.

Tyler, *Ladder of Years* [from Dancygier 2012]

The tenses and pronouns are adapted to the narrator's perspective (*had she typed* rather than *have you typed*), but other than that the impression is that we hear the exact words of Mr. Pomfret. Now recall that in FID the context of thought is shifted to a non-actual context. Technically, this has to be Mr. Pomfret's context, since we interpret the words as his. He, for example, is the one from whose perspective a speech act like *Sorry* is to be interpreted. However, Mr. Pomfret is not presented as a *thinker* at all in this passage. (Strikingly, Delia, another character in the story, is intuitively the thinker here! It is through her eyes that we experience this conversation.) This again shows that the conceptual distinction between a context of a speaker and a context of a thinker is untenable.

**Argument 3: FID in the HP** The mirror image analysis predicts that FID can never occur in the HP, since the two make contradictory requirements on the two contexts. This prediction is falsified by the following passage (note *her* rather than *my* in the last sentence, indicating that it is not a direct thought):

- (4) Louise places the parcel on the kitchen table. She can't wait to open it. Who could have sent it? ... Today seems to be her lucky day. Eckardt (2014: 221)

**Argument 4: HP and other indexicals** Another prediction is that in sentences with the HP all indexicals other than pronouns and tenses are evaluated with respect to the actual context. This prediction is not borne out, as shown by *tonight* in (5), an example that Schlenker gives in a footnote and leaves for future research:

- (5) Forty years ago today John Lennon is about to take to the stage at the Cavern. Tonight his life will change forever.

(Note that here we can add *unbeknownst to him*, showing that this is a different phenomenon from (4).)

**Argument 5: The lack of a non-actual I** While Schlenker treats tenses and pronouns on a par (being variables they are always interpreted with respect to the context of utterance), a striking difference between the two is that we do not find the equivalent of the HP in the person domain, that is a non-actual *I*. The fact that Schlenker (2004:298) needs a psychic to tentatively suggest that it does occur (whereas with the HP the narrator only presents things *as if* the context of utterance is non-actual), only shows that the possibility of a non-actual *I* is not part of our language in the same way as the HP is.

**Argument 6: FID is a report** On Schlenker's account FID (as well as the HP) is not strictly speaking a report since it is analyzed without resource to any modal operator. The formalism only specifies that some indexical elements are evaluated with respect to the context of thought and other with respect to the context of utterance. After having given the truth conditions, Schlenker continues:

Thus even in the absence of the parenthetical 'John thought' the sentence can be understood and will be interpreted as a thought or claim attributed to John (because the Context of Thought is his), uttered through somebody else's mouth (the narrator's). Schlenker (2004:293)

I doubt the legitimacy of *because* here. How does the fact that some elements are interpreted with respect to a non-actual context of thought make that the proposition expressed is that person's thought (cf. Stokke 2013 for a similar point)? It seems that the account does not do justice to the fact that FID propositions are *thought*. This is a big difference between FID and sentences with the HP which suggests that they should be analyzed along fundamentally different lines.

**Argument 7: De se tenses and SOT in FID** Contra the mirror image analysis, tenses in FID are not directly evaluated from the narrator's perspective (see Sharvit 2008). If they were, we would expect it to be possible to report (6a) as (6b) if *tomorrow* evaluated from the context of thought is in the past for the narrator. In fact only (6c) is a correct report.

- (6) a. I will ask her tomorrow.  
b. He asked her tomorrow(, he said).  
c. He would ask her tomorrow(, he said).

Not only SOT phenomena but also the fact that tenses in FID are interpreted *de se* indicates that they should be treated as in indirect discourse.

**Replacing the mirror image** Argument 1 and 2 show that the distinction between thinking and speaking is not relevant here. The first step would be to replace this by two contexts that are conceptually neutral with respect to speaking and thinking, i.e. simply two tuples, each serving a particular class of indexicals (à la Eckardt's (2014) internal and external contexts). However, the other arguments show that even without the conceptual component the mirror image account is untenable and FID and the HP should be analyzed along fundamentally different ways.

As for the HP, I follow Eckardt (2014) in assuming that the HP reading arises due to a change of the external context of evaluation. This then becomes a shift independent from the shift associated with FID, as it should be. For FID, the situation is more complex. First, we need to capture that it is a report. Eckardt offers an additional mechanism for story update to deal with this. This mechanism, however, cannot deal with the *de se* interpretation of tenses since it binds the time of the event described in FID directly to the reference time in the story, leading to absurdities if the character is mistaken about the time. Instead I follow Maier's (2015) quotation/unquotation analysis of FID, which treats FID as a report and has the additional advantage of offering a natural explanation for the intuition that reports in FID are faithful to the original wording. Although it intends to treat tenses as in indirect discourse, this component hasn't been worked out yet. Agreeing with Eckardt that we want to temporally link the events described in FID with the rest of the story, but at the same time recognizing that this should not be a direct link, I propose to use Bary and Maier's (2009) extension of DRT in which updates of the common ground are accompanied by updates of each relevant agent's complex attitudinal state. This extension is particularly suited to solve the tension between *de se* interpretation and anaphoricity, needed to deal with tenses in FID.