

Tense and aspect in picture descriptions

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UBC, August 2020

Full-sentence picture captions are often in the simple present tense; if the sentence also contains a temporal adverbial, this may result in an apparent clash (see, e.g., Huddleston 2002:127, who suggests that the present tense “reflects the permanence of the photographic record”). (1), for instance, would be starkly ungrammatical if it weren't the caption to a picture like Figure 1.

(1) A plane lands yesterday in wet conditions.

An interesting theoretical point can be made here about deixis and visual representations: the caption is a description of the picture rather than of the depicted event; the tense therefore refers to the time of the picture rather than that of the event, whereas the temporal adverbial is predicated of the event itself.

This view is supported by the fact that captions are not always in the present tense. They can have past tense if they don't describe the picture, but an event that is not seen in the picture (Figure 2). A mixed case is Figure 3, where the main clause describing the picture is in the simple present, whereas the *when*-clause is in the past progressive because it describes an invisible background event.

In Reichenbachian terms, I propose that for descriptions of pictures (including captions) the Reference Time (RT) is “the time of the picture”, i.e., the interval during which the picture exists or is available in the context. Because of the very nature of picture captions, this includes the Utterance Time (UT), which is the time when the description is read (the decoding time). Present tense marks coincidence of RT and UT, as usual.

The idea that the RT in picture descriptions is the time of their existence or availability is supported by data involving frame adverbials such as *in this picture*. (For the syntax of such phrases, see Reinhart 1983, and for their semantics, Ross 1997 and Abusch *in press*.) As (2) shows, present tense is used as long as the picture is available in the context, whereas past is used for pictures that were viewed previously but are no longer available.

(2) [Context: The speaker is first shown one picture, which is then taken away or destroyed. The speaker is then shown another picture.]

In the first picture, the man was wearing a blue sweater. In this picture he is wearing a green sweater.

This raises a further question about aspect: why are picture adverbials preferred to co-occur with the progressive, whereas captions are non-progressive? Since in English the progressive is normally obligatory for eventive verbs in the present tense, it's the special behaviour of the captions that requires an explanation. One potential answer is that pictures are static (Abusch 2014), and captions therefore have stative aspect. Another explanation might be that the simple present can be used for eventive verbs if they are simultaneous with the utterance time, as in the sports announcer present (“*He shoots, he scores!*”). By definition captions are part of the picture and therefore necessarily simultaneous with it.

References

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Figures



Figure 1: “A plane lands yesterday in wet conditions [...]”

Source: <https://www.goldcoastbulletin.com.au/news/new-flight-path-from-surfers-south-has-communities-divided/news-story/3ff614c441e909fed7e1f7a3eeb04fd>



Figure 2: “Shares of GFL [...] were down as much as 12 per cent in Tuesday’s trading [...]”

Source: Globe & Mail, August 10, 2020 (print edition)



Figure 3: “A worker mops a Vancouver SkyTrain in March, when the pandemic was just gaining a foothold.”

Source: Globe & Mail, May 9, 2020 (print edition). Also

<https://www.pressreader.com/canada/the-globe-and-mail-bc-edition/20200509/281724091725868>