

Note to the reader

This is an English version of a paper originally written in Dutch for a festschrift for Jack Hoeksema. The translation was produced by Google Translate, which has done an amazing job. It has been lightly edited by the author, removing only the most egregious mistranslations. For any remaining errors, I would like to blame Google.

When citing, please refer to the Dutch original:

Rullmann, Hotze. (2024). *O tempora, o mores: Over fotobijschriften, werkwoordstijden en conventies*. In Bart Hollebrandse, Angeliek van Hout, Roel Jonkers, and Alexander Martin (eds.), *Festschrift for Jack Hoeksema*, pp. 266-281. University of Groningen Press. <https://doi.org/10.21827/tabu.2023.41270>

O TEMPORA, O MORES: ABOUT PHOTO CAPTIONS, VERB TENSES AND CONVENTIONS

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Abstract

In English, but not in Dutch, photo captions often appear in the present tense and also contain an explicit temporal adverbial that refers to a time in the past (e.g. yesterday). This apparent contradiction can be analyzed as a case of 'double deixis', where the verb tense refers to the reference point R (Reference Time), which corresponds to the interval at which the photo is 'available', while the determination of time refers to the moment of effect W (Event Time) of the event in reality outside the photo. This phenomenon is related to other cases of double deixis regarding a representation, such as English futurates that can be in the present tense because they refer to a schedule. Differences between Dutch and English are best understood as language-related stylistic conventions.

Keywords: verb tenses, present tense, image semantics, deixis

1. An outraged newspaper reader

In the 'readers mail' of the *Language Use* section of *de Volkskrant* last year a remarkable use of the present tense was pointed out that deserves further consideration (Goetze, 2022):¹

A present tense can be problematic if it is combined with a clause that screams past tense. 'Yesterday I am very shocked when I read the following sentence,' Johan Bel once wrote to us, by way of a taste of our own medicine. He had stumbled over the caption: **Trumps oud-campagneleider meldt zich vorig jaar zomer voor een hoorzitting** [= 'Trump's former campaign manager reports for a hearing last summer'].

This last sentence (I have put it in bold here for convenience) does indeed seem strange at first glance, and many speakers will even find it downright ungrammatical. Both the letter writer and the journalist from *de Volkskrant* interpreted this as a misplaced case of praesens historicum, as can be seen from the continuation:

'I am familiar with the phenomenon of praesens historicum', says Bel, 'where an event from the past is described in the present tense in order to bring that event to life, but in doing so the reader is, as it were, transported to the past, but this does not happen with an addition such as 'last year'. Then it's the present that is taken as a reference point.' A good and justified point: if you want to use the 'more active' present tense, you must be able to do so. 'Rutte loopt over het Binnenhof' [= 'Rutte walks across the Binnenhof'] fits as a

caption for a photo of Rutte walking across the Binnenhof, even though it happened the day before, but 'Rutte loopt gisteren over het Binnenhof' [= 'Rutte walks across the Binnenhof yesterday'] of course does not sound nice.

There is, as we will see, a certain element of truth in the comment about the reference point, but I think the classification of the bold sentence as a form of praesens historicum is based on a misunderstanding. Not every use of the present tense to refer to a past event is automatically praesens historicum. The *AMS* describes two genres in which historical presentation (as they call it) can occur, namely in “historical works”, and in “lively narrative style [...], especially in spoken language” (Haeseryn et al., 1997, section 2.4.8.3.ii). In both cases it concerns narrative language, which is certainly not the case here.

2. Examples from English

There are two other factors that can explain why the offending sentence could have appeared in a Dutch newspaper. Firstly, it is a photo caption and secondly, it is probably a direct translation from English. Such captions are very common in English-language newspapers. This phenomenon has been known for some time and is mentioned in standard works such as the *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Huddleston, 2002).² Here are some examples found in newspapers (on paper or online):

- (1) A plane lands yesterday in wet conditions at Gold Coast Airport at Coolangatta – without an instrument landing system. (Figure 1)



Figure 1

Source: <https://www.goldcoastbulletin.com.au/news/new-flight-path-from-surfers-south-has-communities-divided/news-story/3ff614c441e909fed7e1f7a3eecb04fd>

- (2) A man sits yesterday in front of collapsed houses in Amatrice. (Figure 2)



A man sits yesterday in front of collapsed houses in Amatrice.

Figure 2

Source: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190624195224/https://www.gulf-times.com/story/510114/Italy-holds-second-state-funeral-for-quake-victims>

- (3) A resident of Alexandra township gets tested for the novel coronavirus in Johannesburg last month. (Figure 3)



A resident of Alexandra township gets tested for the novel coronavirus in Johannesburg last month. JEROME DELAY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Figure 3

Source: *Globe and Mail*, May 30, 2020

- (4) Cirque performer Olivier Sylvestre takes his 'German wheel' for a spin through Parc Lafontaine in Montreal last month. (Figure 4)



Cirque performer Olivier Sylvestre takes his 'German wheel' for a spin through Parc Lafontaine in Montreal last month. The pandemic hurt the festival season, forcing it to shut down dozens of shows, grounding its small army of circus artists. MORGAN TILLEY/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Figure 4

Source: *Globe and Mail*, June 8, 2020

- (5) B.C. Minister of Education Rob Fleming speaks to Jacob Cunliffe, 13, left, and his brother Joshua as they wash their hands after an update on part-time return to classes during a tour of Victoria's Monterey Middle School on June 2. (Figure 5)



B.C. Minister of Education Rob Fleming speaks to Jacob Cunliffe, 13, left, and his brother Joshua as they wash their hands after an update on part-time return to classes during a tour of Victoria's Monterey Middle School on June 2. (Globe and Mail/Chris Wedel)

Figure 5

Source: *Globe and Mail*, August 27, 2020

- (6) A worker mops a Vancouver SkyTrain in March, when the pandemic was just getting a foothold. (Figure 6)



A worker mops a Vancouver SkyTrain in March, when the pandemic was just getting a foothold. As cities reopen in coming weeks, trains are expected to start filling up again.

Figure 6

Source: *Globe and Mail*, May 9, 2020. <https://www.pressreader.com/canada/the-globe-and-mail-bc-edition/20200509/281724091725868>

These sentences in particular would be downright ungrammatical without the accompanying picture, even in English. But they are certainly possible as captions for photos or other images. In all cases there seems to be a contradiction between the present tense of the verb and an adverbial of time in the same sentence: *yesterday* in (1) and (2), *last month* in (3) and (4), and the indication of a specific date (*on June 2*) in (5), or month (*in March*) in (6). In the last two cases, the adverbial clause in itself does not inherently refer to a time in the past (after all, *June 2* and *March* can in principle also be in the future), but from the context it is clear that reference is indeed made to a time in the past that is already over.³ In example (6) this is further reinforced by the use of the past tense in the subordinate clause *when the pandemic was just gaining a foothold*. A special case is formed by (7):

- (7) I wear a necktie for second time since March 9. (First time was Passover.)
(Figure 7)



Figure 7

Source: Twitter

Not only is this a tweet rather than a newspaper photo, but the sentence itself contains no provision indicating when Twitterer David Frum⁴ wore a tie for the second time since March 9, 2000 (the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, presumably). This only becomes clear from the context, namely the retweeted⁵ message. The original tweet, and most likely also the accompanying screenshot, are from April 16, so five days before Frum's re-tweet of the 21st that contains the sentence in question. Although this is not technically a photo caption, it is clear that (7) is only grammatical because the sentence refers to the photo showing the Twitter user wearing a tie. It is also important that the verb is in the simple present (*I wear*). After all, if Frum had wanted to indicate that he was wearing a tie at the time of writing/tweeting, he would have had to use the present progressive: *I am wearing a necktie (right now)*. I will return to this last point later.

3. Double deixis

How can we explain these paradoxical sentences? The fact that they can only occur with an image attached is an important clue. The caption is primarily a description of the photo itself, and not (or only in a derivative sense) of the reality outside the photo. In other words, the caption refers to the photo and not to the event depicted in the photo. The photo is available in the present, and that is why the verb is in the present tense. The temporal adverbial (e.g. *yesterday* in (1)), on the other hand, does not refer to the photo, but to the reality outside the photo (the time of the actual landing of the plane). We are therefore dealing here with what I will call 'double deixis'. On the surface, this seems to present a semantic contradiction in the sentence.

I will try to develop this idea a little further in theoretical terms. As is known, verb tenses can be regarded as deictic elements, comparable to pronouns (Partee

1973). In a Reichenbachian framework, three points in time (or intervals) are distinguished: the utterance time (UT), the reference time (RT), and the event time (ET). Following the *ANS* (Haeseryn et al., 1997, section 2.4.8.2.i), I will use the Dutch terms speaking moment (S), reference point (R), and effect (W). (This terminology is somewhat misleading in that all three cases may involve intervals rather than moments.) As is well known, verb tenses constrain the relationship between R and S (see, for example, Klein, 1994, and much related work in this tradition): the past tense requires that R precedes S ($R < S$), while the present tense expresses that these two intervals coincide or are in an inclusion relationship with each other ($S \subseteq R$).

We can now explain the appearance of the present tense in photo captions by assuming that in that case R is the time interval that lasts as long as the photo is available. S is normally the time of encoding, i.e. the moment at which the sentence is spoken or written, but in certain cases it can also be the time of decoding (reading or listening), for example in the case of a pre-recorded automatic telephone message (e.g., *I am not at home right now. You can leave a message after the beep.*) But for newspapers and magazines there is a third option for S, namely the date of publication. Fortunately, we don't have to worry about this any further, because the photo is available at both the encoding time (the time the caption was written), the time of publication (the day the newspaper appeared), and the decoding time (the time the caption is read). If R is the interval in which the photo is available, then in all three cases it holds that $S \subseteq R$, and therefore the present tense applies. For the remainder of this paper, I assume without further substantiation that for newspaper photos and their captions the publication date counts as S.

As for the time adverbial, we may assume that it refers to the W of the depicted event in reality outside the photo. Deictic terms such as *yesterday* relate this time to S: *yesterday* means that W lies in the day immediately preceding the day of publication. Despite the apparent contradiction between verb tense and the temporal adverbial, a sentence such as (1), as the caption of Figure 1, can therefore be assigned a coherent interpretation. *Yesterday* places the actual landing of the plane at a time during the day preceding the publication date ($W < S$), but the verb appears in the present tense because this date falls in the interval in which the photo is available ($S \subseteq R$). Because the adverbial and verb tense are related to two different intervals (W and R, respectively), we are dealing with double deixis.

4. Further observations

This explanation in terms of double deixis is supported by a number of related facts. First, a caption about a past event can only be in the present tense if that event is indeed depicted in the photo. If that is not the case, as in (8), the past tense should be used. The reason for this is obvious: in that case the caption cannot be interpreted as a description of the photo, but only as a description of the event in reality outside the photo.⁶

- (8) Shares of GFL, which went public earlier this year, were down as much as 12 percent in Tuesday's trading before closing at \$15.53, down 9 per cent from Monday's close. (Figure 8)



Afbeelding 8

Bron: *Globe and Mail*, 19 augustus 2020

This also explains the apparent inconsistency we saw in (6), where the main clause has the present tense, but the subordinate clause has the past tense. The photo shows the mopping of the Skytrain⁷ that is mentioned in the main clause, while the subordinate clause is about something that is invisible in the photo, namely the spreading of the pandemic.

A second point that confirms the explanation proposed here is that we encounter the present tense not only in captions, but also in isolated sentences that give explicit descriptions of what can be seen in a picture, using adverbials such as in this photo. In such cases, the past tense can also be used, namely when the photo is no longer visible or available at the time of speaking. (This works the same way in English.)

- (9) [Context (“Spot the differences”): Person A shows B a photo, then takes it away. Immediately afterwards, A shows B a second, almost identical, photo.]
A: Name some differences between this photo and the others.
B: In the first photo the man was wearing a blue sweater, but in this photo his sweater is green.

This example clearly shows that the relevant R here is the interval in which the photo is visible to the speaker, or, in other words, 'available' as I have called it. If the photo is available at the moment of speaking ($S \subseteq R$), the present tense is used, but if the photo is no longer available at the moment of speaking (i.e. no longer visible or perhaps even destroyed), then the past tense applies ($R < S$).

Third, the proposed explanation is supported by the fact already mentioned that in all cases the verb is in the simple present and not in the present progressive. This is at first glance somewhat surprising because the use of the English simple present is very limited in other respects and can only occur in state descriptions ('statives') such as (10a), in habitual or generic sentences such as (10b,c), or in a number of special cases in which S and W coincide exactly, such as in performative expressions (10d) or in live commentary of sports matches as in (10e), where this is at least pretended (strictly speaking, S is of course always just a little later than W):

- (10) a. Justin is the Prime Minister.
 b. It always rains in Vancouver.
 c. Orcas eat fish.
 d. I promise I won't do it again.
 e. He shoots, he scores!

In all other cases (namely 'eventives' that refer to an event that is happening at the moment of speaking), use of the progressive in English is mandatory (an important point of difference with Dutch):

- (11) [Context: The speaker looks out the window and sees that it is raining outside.]
 a. * It rains.
 b. It is raining.

Why then are photo captions always in the simple present, even when it concerns a verb that is normally 'eventive'? Perhaps the reason is that a photo is by definition something static, and that captions can therefore be interpreted as 'stative', and therefore, like (10a), require the simple present. A caption is part of the photo, so the S of the caption necessarily coincides completely with R (the time the photo was available). In a sense, you could say that the caption refers to the eternal and static 'now' of the image.⁸

5. But why not in Dutch captions?

The fact that captions such as those in (1)-(6) are common in English does not, of course, change the fact that analogous cases seem much less acceptable in Dutch. In that respect I completely agree with the letter writer in *de Volkskrant*. The sentence about Trump's campaign manager in the quoted passage does not work well in Dutch, even as a caption for a photo showing this person at the time of the hearing. What can explain this difference between two closely related languages? It is important that the problem does not lie in the use of the present tense in a photo caption as such, but in its combination with a deictic adverbial of time, such as yesterday or last week. As the journalist from *de Volkskrant* rightly notes, there is nothing wrong with a sentence like *Rutte loopt over het Binnenhof* [= 'Rutte walks across the Binnenhof'] as a caption to a photo of Rutte walking across the Binnenhof, but there is with *Rutte loopt gisteren over het Binnenhof* [= 'Rutte walks across the Binnenhof yesterday'].

It is of course possible in principle that deictic time adverbials such as *gisteren* ('yesterday') in Dutch have a different semantics than their English counterparts. While I can't prove this isn't the case, it honestly seems unlikely to me. There is no other difference between *gisteren* and *yesterday* that this contrast could be reduced to, so at best such an explanation would be highly stipulative. It seems more likely that the possibility of double deixis (the verb tense refers to the photo

but the adverbial to reality outside the photo) is in principle present in the grammar of both languages, but that in English, unlike in Dutch, this has been conventionalized in journalistic language. There are more conventions that play an important role in certain specialized genres. Newspaper headlines, for example, are often very different in form in English than in Dutch, which anyone who has ever looked at an English-language newspaper will have noticed.⁹

These kinds of contrasts between languages are therefore probably more a matter of stylistic conventions that have been established over time than of deep structural differences. But that does not make such stylistic uses any less interesting. They may also be of theoretical interest because they can provide insight into the underlying semantic and pragmatic mechanisms underlying language. As I will argue in the next, more speculative, section, the phenomenon of double deixis provides a glimpse of the role of 'representations'.

6. Images and schedules as representations

In a recent article (Rullmann et al., 2023), my co-authors and I analyzed the so-called plain futurate in English, i.e. the use of the simple present to refer to a future event, as in (12a,b). We argue that this is only made possible by the existence of a 'schedule', such as a timetable or a playing schedule.

- (12) a. The train leaves at 6:15 PM.
b. The Red Sox play the Yankees tomorrow.

The role of 'schedules' in English futurates has often been noted in the literature, but in our article we provide a specific, formal-semantic interpretation of this concept. I will use the Dutch word 'rooster' [= 'schedule'] for this, as a technical term. The possibilities for using the present tense for future events are considerably wider in Dutch than in English. The *ANS* (Haeseryn et al. 1997, section 2.4.8.3.iii) provides a series of examples from present-tense Dutch with a future interpretation; in English, the use of the modal auxiliary *will* would be required in most cases (except when we can imagine a context involving a schedule), as for example in (13). In Dutch, the existence of a schedule is therefore not a requirement for the plain futurate.

- (13) a. Wat dat precies betekent, blijkt pas als we de volledige tekst hebben.
what that precisely means appears only if we the complete text have
'What that means exactly will only become clear once we have the full text.'
b. * Exactly what that means only becomes clear once we have the full text.
c. Exactly what that means will only become clear once we have the full text.

In English, plain futurates like (12a,b) are grammatical only if they are descriptions of a schedule in the same way that captions are descriptions of a photograph. So we

are dealing with a similar double deixis: the temporal adverbial *at 6:15 PM* in (12a) or *tomorrow* in (12b), refers to the *W* of an event that takes place in the future ($S < W$), but the present tense of the verb refers to *R*, in this case the interval in which the schedule is in effect (what Rullmann et al. 2023 call the 'holding time' of the schedule); in (12a,b) this includes the moment of speech ($S \subseteq R$).

We further note that the past tense (simple past) can also be used in a plain futurate, namely when a schedule has been changed so that the old schedule is no longer in effect at the time of speaking ($R < S$), as in (14). Here the verb *played* has the past tense, despite the presence of the adverbial *tomorrow* that refers to the future. This is comparable to the use of the past tense in the spot-the-difference situation with photos as we saw in (9).

- (14) The Major League schedule has been revised. In the original schedule, the Red Sox played the Yankees tomorrow, but now they won't. (= Rullmann et al., 2023, (24))

This indicates that the phenomenon of double deixis may be of greater theoretical importance than initially suspected. It is not simply about a somewhat unfortunate or eccentric use of the present tense, nor just about photo captions, but more generally about deixis to representations, which includes both visual images and schedules. For sentences describing a representation, the verb tense can refer either to the representation itself or to reality outside the representation. If this conjecture is on the right track, it opens up further perspectives that I cannot go into in the scope of this short article.

7. In conclusion

In summary, we can say that there can be many different reasons why a sentence may contain an apparently 'wrong' verb tense. One of these is the use of the historical present in a narrative style, either in historical prose or to make it more vivid. But a completely different cause may lie in what I have called double deixis: the verb tense refers to a representation, such as a picture or a schedule, while an adverbial in the same sentence refers to the represented event or state in reality outside the representation. We have seen this with photo captions, such as (1)-(6), and with other sentences describing images, such as (9), but also with descriptions of schedules, as in (12) and (14). The present tense seems superficially to serve as a past tense in the first two cases, and as a future tense in the last case (plain futurate).

Jack Hoeksema has pointed out a very different type of construction in which a future (potential) event is referred to using the present tense (Hoeksema 2013). In this case it concerns more specifically a near future (imminent future), as for example in (15).

- (15) a. De trein kan elk moment aankomen.
 the train can each moment arrive
 'The train can arrive at any moment.'
 b. The train may arrive any minute (now).

While the verb here is in the present tense, the sentence refers to an event that is expected to occur in the near future (but may not occur until much later or never at all). The construction, which occurs in several Germanic and Romance languages, contains a universal quantifier or 'free choice' word (*elk, any*), a temporal noun (*moment, minute*), a verb or predicate indicating an 'achievement' (*aankomen, arrive*), and a modal element (*kan, may*). Hoeksema shows that despite these similarities, there are at the same time interesting detailed differences in the way this construction is realized in the various languages (for example, where Dutch uses the universal quantifier *elk*, English has the 'free choice' expression *any*). He explains the imminent future interpretation of the construction in terms of the conventionalization of a conversational implicature that has been promoted to an assertion. Both in terms of the use of the present tense for a future event, and in emphasizing subtle differences between closely related languages and the role that conventionalization plays in this, there are interesting connections to be made with the themes discussed in this piece.

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Endnotes

¹ The editors of this Festschrift in honor of Jack Hoeksema gave the authors the option to write their contribution in English or Dutch. I seize this opportunity with both hands to finally be able to publish in my native language again. This is the first time for me since I was a collaborator in Jack's Pionier project on polar expressions in the 1990s. This choice for Dutch seems appropriate to me not only because Jack is retiring as professor of Dutch linguistics, but also as a small protest against the far-reaching Anglicization of Dutch higher education. Don't let Dutch be lost as a language of science! (and especially not as a language of linguistics). But it was not easy for me to write about my field in good Dutch, partly because of the many technical expressions. Unfortunately, I actually have more to say about English in this piece than about Dutch, and I apologize in advance for this. Many thanks to Angeliek van Hout for stylistic improvements and removing a number of old-fashioned expressions. I would also like to thank colleagues and students in the Department of Linguistics at UBC for their comments on oral presentations and discussions on some of this material. And first of all, my great thanks to Jack, who not only gave me my first real academic job at the time, but who has always remained an important source of inspiration for my later work, although he may not have realized it. I hope that this piece does justice to Jack's gift for consistently bringing to light original empirical facts (both large and small), and his ability to distill surprising theoretical insights from even the most insignificant-seeming material.

² I believe that my attention was first drawn to this phenomenon about thirty years ago by an aside comment by Barbara Partee during a lecture. I vaguely remember that she also essentially suggested the idea of double deixis (see below) at the time, but it was too long ago for me to remember the details. Undoubtedly she was right.

³ From my own observations, I have the strong impression that captions with relative temporal adverbials such as *yesterday* are less common in newspapers today than about twenty years ago. The reason for this is obvious: a printed newspaper has a fixed publication date so that it is always clear what is meant by *yesterday* (the day before the date of publication), but nowadays newspaper articles are primarily written for the online edition and then repeatedly updated, making it unclear to the reader which day exactly is referred to as *yesterday*. That is why online captions now usually use an absolute date, such as *June 2*, which then also appears in the printed edition of the newspaper.

⁴ Former speech writer for George W. Bush and the coiner of the term *axis of evil*.

⁵ No idea how to spell that in Dutch...

⁶ Note that the truck in Figure 8 is labeled GFL, which is the only factor that makes the connection between the photo and the caption clear.

⁷ Vancouver's metro network which is largely constructed above ground on stilts.

⁸ This is in line with Huddleston's (2002:127) comment that the present tense in photo captions "reflects the permanence of the photographic record". It should be noted that most native English speakers I consulted prefer the present progressive when it is not a caption, but a description of a photo using an adverbial clause as we saw in (9): *In this picture, he is wearing a blue sweater*. This striking difference

between captions and descriptions that are more loosely related to the photograph is something that requires further analysis.

⁹ Two random headlines from the *Globe and Mail* of July 11, 2023: “*Turkey agrees to support Sweden's entry into NATO: Stoltenberg*” and “*Premiers to discuss public safety, bail reform*”. The use of the present tense for hot news in headlines (*Oranje wint the wereld cup!* [= lit. ‘Orange wins the World Cup’]) is something that deserves a study in itself.