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My First Husband Was Italian (and he still is): "Exceptional" Uses of English Tense and Pedagogical Grammar

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1. Introduction

It is uncontroversial to say that the primary function of English tense is to provide time reference. However, a variety of scholars have observed that English tense also fulfills non-temporal functions. In fact, an examination of various treatments of tense reveals a wide range of commonly occurring, non-temporal uses associated with English tense. What is puzzling is why tense should have numerous non-temporal uses. Most previous analyses (Riddle, 1986 and Fleischman, 1989 excepted) have tended to treat non-temporal uses as exceptions and argued that such uses are either arbitrary or peripheral. In this paper, we offer a cognitive approach to English tense which treats the so-called exceptions as being systematically organized by virtue of experiential correlations between the immediate temporal domain represented lexically by now and the immediate proximal-distal domain represented by here, and other non-temporal domains such as intimacy, salience, actuality and control being similarly structured. That is, we will claim that experience is directly meaningful, giving rise to powerful conceptual associations which are realized in the linguistic system. To our knowledge, no previous research has attempted a unified approach to the full range of English tense usage considered here.

In addition to the theoretical value of providing a unified treatment of temporal and non-temporal meanings associated with tense, such an approach promises to have great utility for second language learners. Traditionally language teachers and applied linguists have assumed, following formal analyses, that the non-temporal meanings associated with tense are not systematically related to the central temporal meaning. Consequently, generations of second language learners have been instructed to memorize these apparent exceptions. Moreover, Riddle (1986) reports that even advanced non-native speakers have difficulty acquiring a number of these non-temporal uses. In this paper we will show that a cognitive linguistic approach to the "exceptional" uses of tense can provide a relatively straightforward, unified treatment of tense phenomena. We take the presumably uncontroversial position that more accurate, complete, systematic accounts of linguistic phenomena should facilitate the task of language teachers, text book writers and learners.

The following exemplify the range of "exceptional" non-temporal uses of tense under consideration in this paper (here we will limit our examples to English; however, similar phenomena are attested in a wide variety of languages, cf. Fleischman, 1989):

(1) a. My first husband was Italian (Riddle, 1986)

The speaker is no longer married to the first husband. Although the first husband is not dead and is still Italian at the moment of the utterance, the speaker chooses past tense. Past tense is employed to indicate emotional distance or lack of intimacy.
b. A: Phil is thinking about getting a Volvo
   B: Sarah has a Volvo
   A: You have got to stop talking about Sarah as if you're still together (Riddle, 1986)

The context in which the utterance occurred is that Speaker B and Sarah were previously in an intimate relationship but the relationship ended and the two have not seen each other for some time. Speaker A interprets Speaker B’s use of the present tense as a claim to intimacy (emotional proximity).

(2) a. In November 1859, Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* was published in London.

Tense is employed to signal the relative status of the information, i.e., past tense signals background status and present tense signals foreground status.

(3) a. I wish I knew what he'll say next (Westney, 1994)
   b. I wish the students liked phonetics (Fleischman, 1989)

Past tense is used to signal a contrary to fact wish or as something which the speaker believes to differ substantially from, or to be substantially distant from, actuality. Fillmore (1990) termed such a speaker attitude as negative epistemic stance.

c. Suppose your house burned down. Do you have enough insurance?

Past tense is used to signal negative epistemic stance towards a situation, i.e., past tense signals a hypothetical situation which the speaker supposes is not true (or is substantially different from reality) at the moment of speaking.

d. If he studied harder now, he would get better grades (Frank, 1983)

Past tense in the *if* clause (the protasis) signals a negative epistemic stance between the conditional situation and reality. The sentence roughly paraphrases as “He is not studying hard right now. If he changes the present circumstances, and he studies harder, it would be possible for him to get better grades.”

(4) a. I was thinking about asking you to dinner (Fleischman, 1989)
   b. I was hoping we could get together next week (Fleischman, 1989)

Past tense is used to attenuate invitations, and hence to decrease the threat to face to the hearer
(e.g., the imposition of an invitation which must be responded to immediately), and to the speaker (e.g., possible immediate rejection of the invitation), cf. Brown and Levinson (1987), and is thus conventionally interpreted as polite.

c. Receptionist (answering telephone): Good afternoon, Dr. Keller's office
   Caller: Yes, I wanted to ask you a question
   (Davies, personal communication)

Past tense is used to attenuate requests.

d. Did you want to take a look at this? (Fasold, personal communication)

e. I thought you might like to try this (Westney, 1994)

Past tense can be used to attenuate suggestions.

f. It's high time we left (Westney, 1994)

Past tense attenuates commands and reprimands, rendering them conventionally more polite.

In the forgoing examples we have seen that tense is crucially employed in English to signal a number of distinct and fundamentally non-temporal meanings. In (1), tense is used to signal emotional distance or intimacy. In (2) tense signals the relative salience or status of the information being conveyed. In (3), tense is employed to signal the appropriate epistemic stance towards a particular scenario, i.e., speaker's degree of commitment to the reality of the scenario, or alternatively how likely it is to come to about. Finally, in (4), tense can have an attenuating function in requests, commands and invitations, mitigating the amount of imposition on the addressee or mitigating potential threats to our public persona or face.

A number of scholars have observed that tense can be used in non-temporal ways (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1998; Comrie 1985; Fleischman, 1989; Quirk et al., 1973; Riddle, 1986; Swan and Smith, 1987; Ter Meulen, 1995; Westney, 1994). However, few scholars have offered explanations for what might motivate native speakers to employ tense in non-temporal ways, and none has attempted to explain the occurrences of all four distinct patterns illustrated by the examples in (1) through (4). As Westney (1994) observes: "Descriptive and pedagogical grammars do not normally aim at a general rule of use [which would include such exceptional uses]. [T]ime reference is treated as dominant and other uses are simply appended" (Ibid.: 79). Riddle (1986) notes that most pedagogical texts ignore the uses illustrated by (1), (2), and (4). If any of them are addressed, the general position is that these uses are arbitrary. This analysis has resulted in second language learners being instructed to must simply learn formulaic phrases to express polite requests, indirect commands, conditionality, etc. with little or no explanation for why the tenses in the phrases they are asked to memorize do not correspond to temporal uses of tense.
Our purpose in this paper is to demonstrate that the so-called "exceptional" uses of tense are highly motivated. Specifically, we suggest that while the proto-typical or central meaning of tense morphemes is to express temporal reference, independently motivated and recurring correspondences in experience, which following work by Grady (1997) we term experiential correlations, give rise to implicatures being associated with tense forms. Through usage, these implicatures can come to be conventionally associated with the tense morphemes. This process of meaning extension we term, following Traugott (e.g., 1989) and Hopper and Traugott (1993) pragmatic strengthening. In essence then, we will argue that morphologically bound English tense markers (past and present tense markers) are meaningful elements which carry time-reference meaning. This meaning can be extended to non-temporal domains in systematic and motivated ways. Clearly, insights provided from this study will also have important ramifications for language learners.

2. The Experiential Basis of Meaning Extension

2.1 Experiential Correlation

One of the remarkable insights to have emerged from broadly "cognitive" approaches to the study of language, has been the realization that lexicalization patterns and grammatical structure derive from the nature of human experience. That is, experience gives rise to meaning which is in turn reflected in the linguistic system. One of the clearest examples of this is the notion of experiential correlation, which has been explored by Grady (1997, 1999a, 1999b). Grady notes that a consequence of the nature of interaction between humans and their environment is that certain kinds of experiences are frequently correlated. For instance, a common, recurring experience in the world is the correlation between the vertical elevation of a physical entity and an increase in the quantity of the entity, which is to say when there is an increase in vertical elevation, there is frequently a correlative increase to the original amount of the entity. By way of illustration, if there are two boxes stacked one on top of the other and a delivery person adds another two boxes to the stack, the height of the stack increases. Hence, height (vertical elevation) and number of boxes (quantity) are correlated in our experience. Similarly, if there is a certain amount of liquid in a container, and more liquid is added, the level of the liquid rises. So, humans frequently experience greater quantity in terms of an increase in vertical elevation.

The notion of two distinct experiences being correlated is an important one as it leads to two distinct concepts becoming linked at the conceptual level. Because an increase in vertical elevation is typically a consequence of an increase in quantity, and this correlation is pervasive in human experience, we come to conceptualize greater quantity in terms of increased vertical elevation, as attested by the following example:

(5) Prices have gone up recently

This sentence has a conventional interpretation in which prices have increased. Yet, this interpretation is achieved by utilizing the linguistic prompts gone up. The point is that language systematically utilizes expressions which conventionally denote vertical elevation to provide an
interpretation of greater quantity. Parenthetically, it is worth noting that it is possible to express roughly the same idea in terms of amount without use of the correlation:

(6) Recently things cost more

We will argue that experiential correlation provides the key to the puzzle of non-temporal uses of English tense.

2.2 Experiential Correlations Involving Physical Proximal-Distal Relations

We now turn to a discussion of the relevant experiential correlations pertaining to the four patterns of non-temporal meanings of tense illustrated in examples 1 through 4, that is intimacy, salience, actuality, and attenuated invitation, requests, and suggestions. As with the correlation between elevation and amount discussed above, we assume that conventional language used to discuss these domains reveals the conceptual links which give rise to non-temporal uses of tense in these four domains. An examination of conventional language usage shows that language from the spatial-distal domain is central, particularly in the domains of intimacy and relative salience. For instance, in the sentence:

(7) Marietta and I have remained close friends even though we haven’t seen each other for several years

the lexeme close, which is clearly from the spatial-distal domain, is conventionally used to signal a high degree of emotional intimacy. The core language used to discuss the status of information or the saliency of information, for instance, foreground and background, also comes directly from the spatial-distal domain. The obvious pattern found in the areas of intimacy and salience has led us to hypothesize that the basic human experience of relative physical proximity (or the spatial-distal domain) may be central in the conceptual organization of all four domains and may provide the answer to why non-temporal meanings of tense are also conventionally used in all four domains.

We turn now to a consideration of the experiential correlations between intimacy and degree of physical proximity, salience and physical proximity, actuality and physical proximity, and attenuation of invitations, etc., and physical proximity. These correlations are diagrammed in figure 1.
2.2.1 Intimacy and Physical Proximity

Due to the nature of human interaction, there is a tight and recurring correlation in experience between intimacy and proximity. In physical terms, two people cannot be intimate, e.g., touch, kiss, have face-to-face conversations, etc., unless they are physically proximal. In terms of familial relations, which are typically considered to be more intimate than the relationship between acquaintances, family members tend to spend a greater proportion of their time in physical proximity with each other than with acquaintances or casual friends. Thus, we typically experience intimacy partly in terms of physical proximity. Due to this recurring experiential correlation between intimacy and physical proximity, these two concepts come to be linked at the conceptual level. One manifestation of this conceptual association is the existence of linguistic expressions such as (7):

(8) Peggy and I have been close for many years, but lately she has been acting a little distant

In this sentence, the notion of physical proximity as denoted by the word *close* has a conventional reading of intimacy and as denoted by the word *distant*, has a reading of lack of intimacy. In fact, the reading is so highly conventionalized that on first inspection we might fail to notice that the literal meanings of *close* and *distant* are not of intimacy and non-intimacy but rather of physical proximity. The point is then, that the nature of experience, and particularly recurring correlations give rise to unconscious associations or links between otherwise unrelated concepts at the conceptual level. These associations are manifested linguistically, illustrating that we typically understand one kind of concept in terms of another precisely due to our experiencing the two concepts in a correlated fashion.
2.2.2 Salience and Physical Proximity

Another experiential correlation associated with physical proximity is that of salience. Due to the nature of our sense organs, particularly our eyes, that which is closer to us is more salient, that which is at a distance less salient. That which is closer tends to be that which is in foveal vision and more clearly observable, while that which is physically distant tends to be in peripheral vision and less clearly observable. That which is closer appears to be relatively larger, what which is distant appears to be relatively smaller. Entities which are located physically closer to humans or events which take place physically closer are more likely to demand immediate attention than those which are physically distant. For this reason, entities which are closer are more salient, while those which are further away are less salient. By way of example, in a situation in which a human can see two tigers, the tiger which is ten feet away is likely to be more salient than the one a quarter of a mile away. Hence, there is an extremely tight experiential correlation between salience and physical proximity in human experience. This is illustrated by the following:

(9) We have to keep focused on the pressing issues of the day, those which are close to hand, not some distant threat or peripheral controversy

In this sentence, the lexical items *focus*, *pressing* and *close at hand*, which are from the spatial-distal domain, are used to indicate which issues the speaker holds to be most salient while the items *distant* and *peripheral* are used to indicate those which the speaker holds less salient or important.

2.2.3 Actuality and physical proximity

A third experiential correlation associated with physical proximity involves the degree of cognitive commitment to actuality. By actuality we mean that which a person believes to be objectively true and reliably known. Generally our cognitive commitment to the actuality of something which can be verified perceptually is much stronger than to something which we cannot verify. Given the physiological constraints on human sense-perception, that is, given that the ability of our sense organs allows us to see, hear, smell, etc. most acutely that which is within an area which is physically proximal to us, our sense of actuality correlates tightly with physical proximity. This correlation is attested by expressions such as:

(10) a. I saw it with my own eyes
    b. I know someone was in the house. I heard the sound of footsteps with my own ears

Moreover, it follows that while we can be sure of that which is verifiable by our own senses, we are less sure of that which not available to our own senses. Thus, we are cognitively committed to what is proximate and physically verifiable and we conceptualize these entities and events as realis; we are much less committed to the actuality of that which is distant and not physically verifiable.
2.2.4 Attenuation, control, and physical proximity

The fourth experiential correlation which concerns us here is that between attenuation of invitations, requests, suggestions and physical proximity. Invitations, requests, and suggestions all place impositions on the addressee and in effect to ask the addressee to comply with the speaker’s wishes. In experiential terms, in order to be able to physically ensure another person’s compliance with one’s wishes and hence to control another’s actions, the controlling entity must be physically proximal to the entity being controlled. This gives rise to a tight correlation between control and physical proximity, as attested by examples such as the following:

(11) She kept a tight grip on the budget

In this sentence, the degree of control over the budget is articulated by the phrase *tight grip* which literally denotes very close physical contact. Examples such as these are licensed by virtue of the experiential correlation between control and physical proximity, which give rise to the two concepts becoming linked at the conceptual level. Physical distance often results in a lessening of control and compliance. This state is reflected in sayings such as:

(12) When the cat’s away the mice will play

Thus, we conclude that there is good evidence that all four areas which are associated with non-temporal uses of tense are involved in experiential correlation with the domain of physical proximity.

3. Tense Morphemes as Proximal-Distal Markers

3.1 The Experiential Correlation Between Now and Here

Before we examine how the four experiential correlations from figure 1 give rise to non-temporal uses, we briefly consider the nature of temporal uses of tense. As noted by a number of scholars (e.g., Comrie, 1985; Rauh, 1983; Traugott, 1975, 1978) tense is a deictic phenomenon which signals time reference with respect to a reference point or deictic center. The reference point typically assumed is coding time, or time of speaking (cf. Cutrer, 1994, for a detailed study of the way in which the deictic center can shift during the on-going construction of discourse). Clearly, coding time is a temporal concept, and hence tense constitutes a grammatical means of locating events in time, with respect to coding time (Comrie, 1985).

Turning to the relationship between the temporal and proximal-distal, Grady (1997) has noted that in experiential terms there is a tight correlation between the temporal concept of *now* and the locative concept of *here*. That is, the temporal present will necessarily correlate with a particular physical location which is proximal to the human experiencer. In other words, we cannot help but experience the present moment in terms of our immediate physical surroundings and our sensory perceptions of them. This tight correlation in experience between *now* and *here* gives rise to the two concepts becoming linked at the conceptual level. Given that tense morphemes typically obtain their time reference with respect to the temporal *now* (the coding time), which is
experienced in terms of that which is physically proximal, it is not surprising that time and (physical) distance are closely linked conceptually. It is this linking which in part licenses our ability to conceptualize temporal events in terms of physical location and distance, as attested by expressions such as: *Christmas is getting closer, Long, long ago in a galaxy far away, In the not too distant past.* (Indeed, the conceptual linking is so strong, it has led some researchers, for instance Lakoff and Johnson (1999) to suggest that "time, in English and in other languages is, for the most part, not conceptualized and talked about on its own terms" (Ibid.: 139). However, this is perhaps too strong a claim. In fact, lexical items such as *now, then, yesterday, today, tomorrow,* etc. are clearly dedicated solely to the temporal domain and indicate that it does have distinct lexemes. This suggests that while the temporal domain is related and often structured in terms of the spatial domain, it nonetheless consists of distinct and identifiable concepts.)

In view of the foregoing, we are now in a position to add temporal reference, or the concept of now, to the experiential correlates of figure 1. This amended schematic is diagrammed as figure 2.

![Figure 2 Experiential Correlates including the temporal now](image)

Figure 2 only represents the experiential correlates associated with the proximal. However, the spatial-distal domain is not a single point consisting only of the proximal; it is a continuum with two poles--the proximal and the distal. Our previous discussion has demonstrated that the domains of intimacy, salience, actuality and control/attenuation exploit language associated with both the proximal and distal poles. In addition, our discussion of the temporal domain showed that the language used to articulate temporal notions also exploits the full proximal-distal continuum. Thus, we find examples such as *a long time ago.* In terms of distinct lexical items from the temporal domain and spatial-distal analogs, *now* clearly correlates with the proximal pole. However, the appropriate representation for the distal pole is less evident. We believe that this may be the case because the human experience of *now* is acute and ubiquitous and obviously experienced in terms of *here,* while our experience of 'some time other than now' is always attenuated. That is, the experience of 'some other time' is always in the realm of memory or imagination rather than in direct, ongoing, moment to moment experience. Thus, we simply
represent the distal analog of now simply as not now. Figure 3 represents the complete proximal-distal continuum and its experiential correlates in the five domains under consideration. While the inner of the two circles represents proximal relations, the outer circle represents distal relations. Hence, figure 3 predicts that while proximity correlates with intimacy, salience (foreground), acuality (realis), temporal present (now), and control (lack of attenuation), similarly, physical distance correlates with lack of intimacy, lack of salience (background), non-actuality (irrealis), temporal dislocation (not-now), and lack of control (attenuation and hence politeness).

![Figure 3 Conceptual Associations Between 5 Conceptual Domains and Distal-Proximal Relations, Due to Experiential Correlation](image)

3.2 Recruitment, Implicature, and Tense

To this point, we have established that the spatial-distal domain, as reflected in everyday language use, provides a powerful cognitive organizer for the domains of intimacy, salience, actuality, attenuation/control and temporality. However, this observation does not fully explain the non-temporal uses of English tense in examples (1) through (4).

Within the temporal domain, there are two sets of bound tense morphemes in English, one for present tense and one for past tense. As we have noted previously, such morphemes constitute form-meaning pairings. The zero form without a morphological realization is commonly referred to as the present tense and has a meaning of now. The other synthetic tense form, which we will label as [Id] is commonly referred to as the past tense. This form has a meaning of anterior or more simply not now. Given the experiential correlation between now and physical proximity (i.e., here) these two forms can be recruited to represent proximal and distal poles.

We have also argued that other concepts such as intimacy, salience, actuality, and attenuation/control have, due to experiential correlation, come to be structured conceptually in
terms of physical proximity (or here). Accordingly, we hypothesize that due to the parallel conceptual associations between a range of conceptual domains and physical proximity, tense morphemes can implicate proximal-distal relations in non-temporal domains. That is, tense morphemes can come to implicate intimacy, salience etc. Through continued use these implicatures come to be conventionally associated with these tense morphemes.

3.2.1 Tense As An Expression of Intimacy Relations

Now we return to the examples of non-temporal uses of tense with which we began our discussion. Turning first to intimacy, we saw that there is an independently motivated conceptualization of intimacy in terms of proximal-distal relations as illustrated in example 5. Example (1), repeated below, illustrates the proximal-distal function of tense within the domain of intimacy:

(1) a. My first husband was Italian

In this example, the use of was cannot be in the domain of temporal reference organized in relation to coding time as the first husband is still Italian. It is not the case that he was once Italian and is now Bulgarian for instance. Given that the sentence describes a marital relation, some degree of intimacy is involved. Moreover, the degree of intimacy is a distal one as the adjective first implies that there is a second husband. We thus infer that the first husband and the speaker are divorced. Accordingly, the parallel between temporal reference and intimacy, namely that they are both conceptualized in terms of proximal-distal relations gives rise to an implicature that the distal relation being prompted for by the use of the past tense refers not to the temporal domain, but rather that of intimacy. In such a scenario, the use of was implicates a relationship which is no longer intimate. Through use, the implicature of intimacy relations has become conventionalized, such that it is associated with tense in particular situations. The process of conventionalization of implicature we refer to as pragmatic strengthening (Traugott, 1989; Hopper and Traugott, 1993; See also Bybee et al., 1994).

3.2.2 Tense As An Expression of Saliency

We find an analogous recruitment of English tense to indicate proximal and distal positions in the area of saliency. We illustrate with example (2), which is repeated below:

(2) a. In November 1859, Charles Darwin’s Origin of the Species was published in London.

The main point of the paragraph is not the precise date of the publication of this book. The point is the content of the book. The information presented in the first sentence establishes the frame for the focal information which occurs in the second sentence. Discourse analysts have often referred to the relative status of information such as that in sentence (2)a as background and
information such as that in sentence (2)b as foreground. In this example, tense is employed to signal the relative status of the information, i.e., past tense signals background status and present tense signals foreground status.

3.2.3 Tense As An Expression of Actuality

As we have previously observed tense can be employed to express epistemic stance. Let us reconsider example (3) c, reproduced below:

(3) c. Suppose your house burned down. Do you have enough insurance?

Normal interpretation of this sentence is that the speaker is hypothesizing about an event which the speaker does not believe to have taken place, i.e. the speaker is not referring to an actual event in which the addressee’s house burned down at some time before the moment of speaking. This negative epistemic stance is in part signaled by the lexeme suppose. In this example, past tense signals a distal relation which cannot hold in the temporal domain. That is, the sentence cannot be interpreted as referring to a past event, as the house has not previously burned down. The use of past tense here implicates a distal interpretation in the domain of actuality. That is, the past tense is employed to signal negative epistemic stance or the speaker’s weak commitment towards the actuality of the state being predicated.

We have argued that an independently motivated experiential correlation exists between actuality and physical proximity. As with the domains of intimacy and salience, the tense system is recruited to implicate proximal and distal relations in the domain of actuality. Through use this implicature has been conventionalized, hence, examples such as (3)c provide conventional readings in which we obtain an actuality reading rather than a temporal reading.

3.2.4 Tense As An Expression of Attenuation

We now turn to the final non-temporal meaning of tense which we will address in this paper. Consider the following example which is adapted from (4)c above.

(13) I wanted to ask you a question

In sentences such as (13) we conventionally understand that the use of past tense does not place the desire to ask the question in the past, but rather that it attenuates and hence makes such requests more polite. We suggest that the meaning of attenuation associated with the use of past tense is an implicature motivated by the experiential correlation holding between control and physical proximity.

We have observed that the ability to guarantee compliance and hence control an entity is dependent in experiential terms, on the controller being physically proximal to the entity to be controlled. If the controller is not physically proximal he/she is unable to physically affect and hence control the entity. In (13) the use of past tense signals a distal relation, although we know from context that this does not apply to the temporal domain, as the speaker wants to ask the
question at the moment of speaking. Due to the correlation between control and physical proximity, the distal relation is held to be in effect in the domain of control. The use of past tense linguistically displaces the speaker from the immediate now and here. The use of the past tense creates a conventionally agreed upon linguistic fiction that the speaker is not proximal to the addressee and therefore cannot physically force the addressee to comply. Given that requests, favors etc. place an imposition on the addressee, if the speaker is implicating that the addressee is not under the speaker's control, then there is less imposition. In Brown and Levinson’s terms, use of past tense constitutes a politeness strategy. Fleischman (1989) also notes that by placing the request in the past, the speaker is lessening risk his or her own face threat. If the addressee rejects the invitation or request, the speaker can potentially deny that it was ever actually offered. Thus, the use of past tense results in an implicature of attenuation which has become highly conventionalized.

4. Consequences for a Pedagogical Grammar

A number of researchers have noted the difficulty second language learners regularly encounter with non-temporal uses of English tense. For instance, Riddle (1986) documented that advanced learners of English often experience difficulty appropriately interpreting and producing non-temporal uses of tense in the areas of intimacy and salience. While advanced learners tend to learn to mitigate requests and suggestions through the use of the so-called past tense modals could and would, they experience a good deal of confusion over the type of attenuated invitations, requests, and suggestions exemplified in (4) (Celcia-Murcia and Freeman-Larsen, 1998). Lock (1996) notes that uses of tense to indicate actuality presents problems for learners.

We believe that at least part of this difficulty stems from the way English tense is represented in contemporary reference grammars and English as a Second Language (ESL) texts. As Riddle (1986) pointed out, ESL texts tend to present past tense solely as meaning 'completed before the time of speaking'; 'exceptional' uses, especially in the areas of intimacy, saliency, and attenuation, are generally ignored all together. For instance, The Collins Cobuild English Grammar (1994) lists "vivid narrative" and "firm plans for the future" as the only "other uses of tenses." (Ibid.: 257). Their sections on politeness make no mention of the use of past tense to implicate attenuation. Lock (1996) presents uses of tense in a variety of extended discourse contexts, but does not mention tense to implicate foreground and background; neither does he mention use of past to implicate attenuation.

When non-temporal uses are presented, for instance in hypothetical constructions, they tend to be discussed in terms of exceptional, arbitrary constructions to be memorized. For example, from Collins Cobuild, "When you are talking about an unlikely situation, you use simple past tense in the conditional clause.." (Ibid.: 350). No explanation of why past tense is used in this situation is given. Similarly, Lock (1996) offers the following rule for unlikely conditions: "The general rule is that a condition is marked as unreal by the tense of the finite verb group being one step back in the past relative to its tense in the expression of a real condition..." (Ibid.: 199). No further explanation follows. Finally, Westney (1994) reported difficulty English teachers and texts have in articulating generalizations which cover many everyday uses of English tense. He notes
that uses involving actuality and attenuated suggestions are simply unexplained exceptions which render rule-making very difficult.

In sum, the typical ESL student appears to be presented with a partial list of uses of English tense, rather than a unified model, along with the advice that memorization of the arbitrary patterns is the best policy as there is no systematicity in the various non-temporal uses. We hypothesize that the straightforward, unified approach offered by the present analysis will facilitate the learning of these frequently occurring non-temporal uses of English tense.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that the central meaning of tense is temporal reference, which is constructed in experiential terms from proximal-distal relations. Due to the nature of experience, independently motivated experiential correlations which concepts such as intimacy, salience, control and actuality with physical proximity can lead, in certain contexts, to tense morphemes implicating non-temporal meanings. These situated inferences or implicatures through use can come to be conventionalized, a process we have termed pragmatic strengthening.

In terms of language teaching, this account has great utility as it provides a unified account of tense phenomena. Hence, it would be more teachable and coherent than theoretical accounts which assume that non-temporal meanings are arbitrarily related to the temporal reference meaning of tense.
References


