Sequence of Tense in Italian

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Introduction: Parametric variation in Sequence of Tense (SoT) phenomena (the temporal interpretation of a past tense simultaneous to an embedding past tense) has been variously discussed in the literature, where a clear-cut distinction between two language families has been identified: SoT languages like English, for which a simultaneous reading arises only in past-under-past embeddings, and non-SoT languages like Japanese expressing the same interpretation only with present-under-past embeddings. Despite the growing interest for Sequence of Tense, little attention has been devoted to Romance languages such as Italian, assumed to belong to the SoT group (Giorgi & Pianesi 2000). I will demonstrate that most standard semantic strategies adopted to capture the simultaneous (SIM) reading in English cannot be applied to Italian, which has a richer Tense-Aspect-Mood system, and a pronominal approach in the spirit of Kratzer (1998) can better capture the SoT phenomenon.

Background: Sentences like (1-a) in English are deemed ambiguous between a simultaneous and a backward-shifted reading:

(1)   a.   John said that Mary was sick.
      b.   John said: 'Mary was sick.'   *Backward-Shifted reading* (BACK)
      c.   John said: 'Mary is sick.'   *Simultaneous reading* (SIM)

Standard accounts treating (1-a) as a genuine ambiguity can be subsumed in three approaches: (i) postulating an SoT rule optionally deleting the embedded past tense at LF (Ogihara 1995), (ii) non-local licensing of the embedded past tense by a covert PAST operator c-commanding it (Stowell 2007), (iii) reducing the embedded tense to a bound variable (Kratzer 1998).

The view from Italian: A sequence of tense in Italian is compatible only with an embedded Imperfective past form (*Imperfetto*), while the Absolute Past (the perfective form *Passato Remoto*) unambiguously shifts the evaluation time to a preceding time.

(2)   Gianni disse   che Maria **dormì/dormiva** sul   divano. (#SIM/SIM)
      John   say.REM that Mary sleep.**REM/IMP** on+the couch.
      'John said that Mary slept/was sleeping on the couch.'

Following the SoT parameter, there should be an analogous rule in Italian deleting the embedded past tenses in (2), but this would wrongly predict that REM-under-past embeddings might yield a SIM reading. Even more problematic is the stipulation of a selective covert licensor which licenses only certain morphological forms in certain positions. On the other hand, Imperfect exhibits typical pronominal properties, in that it is usually interpreted anaphoric to a higher temporal referent and seems to lack quantificational force (Giorgi & Pianesi 2000). Even more interestingly, Imperfect seems to pattern with *pro* (the phonologically null subject dropped in some Romance languages):

(3) Solo io ho   mangiato le ciliegie che io/- ho   raccolto. (#Sloppy/Sloppy)
     Only I have eaten   the cherries that *I/pro* have picked.

In (3), *pro* does not pick out the speaker, rather its ϕ-features are *suspended*, thus it is bound by the higher focused pronoun.

Analysis: While the semantics of the Absolute Past (REM) seems to be better captured within a Relative Theory of Tense (see among others Ogihara 1995), more complex is the case of IMP-under-past embeddings.
Based on the analogy with *pro*, Italian Imperfect can be morphologically decomposed into an imperfective Asp-head and a null T-head, which I will call *t-pro*.

(4)   [TP 2 [TP [T t-pro$_2$][AspP [Asp IPFV] [VP]]]]

t-pro does not have inherent tense-features, but might be assigned a [+past] feature from context or a local adverbial. This gives rise to the two options in (4), where the Imperfect T-head behaves as a free variable or as a bound variable.

(5)   **t-pro$_2$**: $[\![\text{t-pro}_2]\!]$ = g(2).

t-pro is of type $\langle i \rangle$. When its past features are not interpreted, it does not presuppose a precedence relation to the utterance time. Therefore it is locally bound by a c-commanding abstractor, which will in return generate a property of times, suitable argument for the reporting/attitude verb in the matrix. On this analysis, Imperfect receives a *de Se* interpretation, from which we obtain the SIM reading of (2).

Conclusion: It has been argued that the inventory of past tenses in Italian crucially differs from English, in that it distinguishes between a relative tense bearing perfective aspect (REM) and an imperfective pronominal tense, whose features are optionally assigned and thus interpreted in the semantic component of the system (IMP). While the former always gives rise to BACK readings when heads the TP of a complement clause, a SIM reading is only compatible with the latter, interpreted de Se as a bound variable. These findings call for a finer principled explanation of SoT phenomena, not solely relying on deletion rules. Moreover, they provide further evidence in favor of a structural and against a pragmatic account of SoT phenomena, in that SoT in Italian seems possible regardless of the lexical aspect of the embedded verb.
However, some pending issues still remain to be explored, especially with respect to Mood-Tense interactions and the modal component of Imperfective tense, here overlooked.

References

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