Syntactic Analysis of Past-Shifting and Simultaneous Readings with the Past Morpheme

The simultaneous reading and the past-shifting reading with the past morpheme are found cross-linguistically, which is not because of the dual meaning of the past tense morpheme, but because of the temporal relationship between the matrix TP and the subordinate TP in syntax.

(1) John said that Mary left.

As Stowell pointed out, when a matrix clause has semantic past tense meaning (i.e. T_1 [+past]), the complement clause contains the simultaneous interpretation with the past morpheme. In addition, the subordinate past event (ET_2) can be also considered as the prior event relative to the matrix past event (ET_1) naturally, which is called "a past-shifting" interpretation.

(2) a. John will say that Mary left.
b. John said that Mary left.

As is illustrated above, both ET_2 in (2a, b) occurs before the ET_1, which yields a past-shifted reading; however, the past morpheme simply indicates temporal meaning of past only, without anchoring sequence of detailed temporal interpretation. How about the ordering between the speech time (ST) and the event in the subordinate clause? The ordering between ST and ET_2 in each sentence is not the same; for example, (2a) and (2b) show a significant difference in terms of ordering between ST and ET_2 within the subordinate clause. In (2b), ET_2—ST (i.e. either leaving > saying > ST or leaving = saying > ST) is the only possible ordering whereas (2a) allows either ET_2—ST (i.e. leaving—ST—saying) or ST—ET_2 (i.e. ST—leaving—saying). However, E_2 always precedes E_1 regardless of the temporal location of ST. Even though 'the intrinsic lexical semantics of PAST remains constant in all contexts (Stowell, 2007:445),' the past tense of the subordinate clause is inherently controlled by tense in the matrix clause locating the subsequent event (ET_2) in relation to the previous event (ET_1).
The matrix TP binds the reference time (RT) that anchors the ET in the subordinate clause. I propose that the CP hosts tP, in which [anterior] and [EPP] are contained, and tP subsequently hosts TP (just like vP hosts VP as Butler (2004) suggests) in the subordinate clause. Therefore, the mono-clause structure, *Sam left*, always presents TP [+past] only while TP [+past] in the subordinate clause in the complex sentence is controlled by the matrix TP as well as tP in the subordinate clause successively. Therefore, the valued feature (Chomsky, 2000) in tP (i.e. [anterior] in this study) in syntax can account for semantic ambiguity between the simultaneous reading and the past-shifting reading with the past morpheme in the subordinate clause.

Selected References

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Chomsky, N. (2000). Minimalist Inquiries, the Framework. In *Step by Step*, ed. R. Martin, D. Michaels, and J. Uriagereka, 89-155. Cambridge: MIT Press
Stowell, T. (2007). The Syntactic Expression of Tense, *Lingua 117*.