

The Anaphoric Theory of Tense
Abstract for SALT 16
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In this talk I will examine some consequences of the following set of hypotheses, advanced in the first instance with respect to English:

1. Tenses are binary relations, with the obvious interpretations; and the principles of Sequence of Tense in the basic cases are (as suggested in some earlier work of mine) syntactically driven, anaphoric relations between the implicit arguments constituting the θ -grids of the tenses.
2. English Perfect and Progressive are purely aspectual, with binary θ -grids of their own, whose first argument positions, which are the ones affected by Tense, are related to, but distinct from, the event position in their complements. The principles governing Sequence of Tense may, if this is right, be carried over from the basic cases intact.
3. Indexical adverbials in complement clauses give rise to a special profile of acceptability and unacceptability under Sequence of Tense. This profile may be based on temporal “category mistakes;” but it must, as minimal pairs will show, have a syntactic explanation.

Some general discussions (e.g., by von Stechow, discussing Abusch’s referential version of the anaphoric theory) have been skeptical of tense anaphora. I will argue that the skepticism is misplaced. I will also consider the sorting out of some factors influencing the acceptability of patterns of Tense requiring “double access” readings, and how to understand both root and embedded tenses as subjective; e.g., as referring, not to *the* present or past, but to a *thinker’s* present or past.