Temporal interpretation and discourse structure in Northern Paiute

Temporal interpretation is usually considered forward moving. Depending on the aspect of the predicates involved and any temporal modifiers, the event described by a clause is interpreted as either overlapping with or following the event described by the preceding clause (Kamp and Rohrer 1983, Partee 1984, Dowty 1986, Hinrichs 1986). Not all discourses are, however, forward moving—e.g. Max fell. John pushed him.—suggesting that RHETORICAL RELATIONS, the relations that hold clauses together in discourse, also contribute to temporal interpretation (Kehler 2002, Asher and Lascarides 2003). Using original fieldwork data, I propose that the SEQUENTIAL morpheme -si in Northern Paiute (Uto-Aztecan, Numic: western United States), which constrains the temporal interpretation of predicates in unexpected ways, in fact marks their participation in a certain class of rhetorical relations—namely, Asher and Lascarides’ NONSTRUCTURAL relations. This adds crosslinguistic support to their typology of rhetorical relations, as well as for the relevance of discourse structure to temporal interpretation more generally.

English, like many languages, can mark temporal relations with adverbial subordinators like before and after. Northern Paiute lacks such specific markers, though it has a verbal morpheme, the so-called sequential -si, which Thornes (2003:456) says appears on verbs that temporally precede verbs they precede in discourse (1). I show, however, that the sequential morpheme does not convey a unique temporal relation. It can occur on verbs that temporally follow verbs they follow in discourse (2). And even linear order is not sufficient for determining temporal order, since -si can appear on verbs that temporally precede verbs they follow linearly (3). Not all combinations of temporal and linear order are possible, as -si NEVER occurs on verbs that temporally follow verbs they precede in discourse.

(1) Paa’a-gguba-tu tsibui-si ma-tu witua ti=ddzopigi-guba wina-kati.
water-LOC-LOC emerge-SEQ there-LOC pail REFL=head-LOC wear-IMPF
‘After he crawled out of the water, he had the pail on his head.’ (prompted text, BP24-1-t3)

(2) . . . ka=papaba-ggu-na-ggwe-tu hanniggwine’ e ka=tiba timma-we-tu hani-si.
OBJ=big.PL-OBJ-LOC-LOC do-send.away OBJ=pinenut basket-LOC-LOC do-SEQ
‘. . . you take the bigger pieces out and set them aside, then the pinenut goes into the sifting basket.’
(procedural narrative, BP09-1-t4)

(3) Yaa hibbi tibbi-ma kati pita-ga su=naatsi’i u-ma si’e-hu-si.
there PTCL rock-LOC sit below-LOC SUBJ=boy 3SG-LOC scare-PERFV-SEQ
‘The boy went to sit on the rock, because he got scared of him.’ (prompted text, BP25-2-t1)

I propose that the sequential morpheme occurs in clauses participating in one of Asher and Lascarides’ NONSTRUCTURAL rhetorical relations. The STRUCTURAL relations Parallel and Contrast, found in coordinations with and and but respectively, require structural isomorphism and impose no temporal constraints. In contrast, the nonstructural relation Narration requires the two clauses it relates form a common topic with the first temporally preceding the second. Narration holds between the clauses in (1–2); consequently, the -si-marked verb temporally precedes when it linearly precedes (1), and temporally follows when it linearly follows (2). The nonstructural Explanation relation requires a clause to explain and temporally precede a clause it follows linearly. The clauses in (3) form an Explanation, and consequently the second, -si-marked verb temporally precedes the first verb. The sequential morpheme also permits the other nonstructural relations, Background and Elaboration, which require overlapping temporal interpretations (data not shown). Since there are no nonstructural rhetorical relations that require a verb to temporally follow a verb it precedes in discourse, -si never occurs with this temporal interpretation.

The Northern Paiute sequential morpheme admits a varied, but not unlimited, range of temporal interpretations. This distribution, I argued follows from the rhetorical relations it allows, showing how discourse structure can contribute to temporal interpretation.
References


