Lascarides and Asher [L&A93a] cite three problems for the Reichenbachian account of the interpretation of pluperfect constructions advocated in Kamp [Kamp91] and Kamp and Reyle [K&R93]. They suggest an alternative analysis based on the Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT) of Asher [Asher93] and a theory of discourse attachment, Discourse and Commonsense Entailment (DICE), of Lascarides and Asher [L&A93] which purports to solve these problems. The purpose of this paper is to defend the Reichenbachian analysis on the basis of the facts that (a) two of the three problems observed by L&A are in fact not ‘problems’ for a syntactically based theory of temporal interpretation at all, but rather facts about the pragmatics of discourse interpretation that a syntactic analysis of tense constructions would be under no obligation to explain and (b) that the remaining problem is in no way solved by L&A’s alternative analysis, but is rather handled by postulating a constraint against the triviality of discourse updates that can be incorporated into the formal definition of a sentence’s update potential and is in fact very much in the spirit of what it intuitively means to be an ‘update.’

Consider:

(1a) John entered the room.
(1b) He poured himself a drink.

In light of the fact that the discourse in (1a)-(1b) is coherent, what L&A call the Relevance Problem is illustrated by the fact that a syntactic account of the pluperfect fails to explain the incoherence of (2a)-(2b) below.

(2a) John poured himself a drink.
(2b) #He had entered the room.

L&A propose to “think of the pluperfect as a discourse marker that indicates the range of possible connections that would make a clause ‘contextually relevant’” ([A&L93a] p.2) in order to explain the incoherence of (2a)-(2b), in effect claiming that the discourse is incoherent because the sentence in (2b) does not meet the relevance criteria with respect to (2a) which must be fulfilled in order to license a pluperfect construction. A rule called Constraint When Changing Tense is introduced whose effect is to impose a restriction such that the “discourse relations permitted between a simple past and a pluperfect are exactly Elaboration, Explanation, Parallel, and Contrast.” (Ibid. p.5) The rule is meant to account for the discrepancy in acceptability between the two sequences (1a)-(1b) and (2a)-(2b), above. We believe that there are serious problems in this analysis, some which are intuitive, others empirical.

From an intuitive perspective, it would be a rather peculiar fact about the evolution of linguistic behavior if a discourse marker that functioned in the manner described above had actually shown up in natural language. It is not at all clear how a ‘disjunctive’ discursive cue that indicated a rather large range of rhetorical possibilities would be at all useful to an interpreter. Further, assuming that the pluperfect is indeed a discourse marker, it is being claimed to affect the coherence of discourses in a way that no other discourse marker seems to. (For example, John entered the room. Nevertheless, he poured himself a drink provokes puzzlement, but is certainly not incoherent.)
Furthermore, from an empirical standpoint, the \textit{Constraint When Changing Tense} forces predictions that are simply not correct. For example, consider the coherent continuations below:

\begin{align*}
(3a) & \quad \text{John poured himself a drink.} \\
(3b) & \quad \text{He had entered a room.} \\
(3b') & \quad \text{He had stumbled into the room.} \\
(3b'') & \quad \text{He had entered the room with a giraffe on a leash.}
\end{align*}

The analysis involving \textit{Constraint When Changing Tense} predicts each (3b), (3b'), and (3b'') either to be incoherent or to bear an Elaboration or Explanation or Parallel or Contrast relation to the sentence in (3a). Clearly such a prediction is not satisfied. Thus we claim that this line of analysis deserves to be abandoned. Rather, we may show that the reason (1a)-(1b) is incoherent has nothing to do with discourse relations at all, but is instead due to the fact that the sentence in (1b) is a continuation of (1a) that simply fails to be informative. The triviality of (1b) is perhaps not entirely transparent, but it can be shown that, given the complicit pressure of a bridging inference related to the definite description \textit{the room} – the type of bridging inference advocated by, e.g., Lascarides and Asher [L&A98] – (roughly: the only salient room available as a referent is in fact the room wherein the initial (drink pouring) event represented in the discourse took place) along with an extremely plausible law we propose to exist in the knowledge base of an interpreter (something like: If \( x \) is in \( A \) at time \( t \), then necessarily \( x \) entered \( A \) at time \( t^{-}\)), the sentence adds no information to the context generated by (1a).

Such an analysis is attractive for at least two reasons. From an empirical point of view, it will not only explain the incoherence of other pluperfect constructions, but is also extendable to account for the incoherence of other sentences and discourses that do not employ pluperfect constructions, e.g., relative clauses.

\begin{align*}
(5) & \quad \# \text{The man who visited us arrived.} \\
(6) & \quad \text{The man who visited us arrived in a limousine.}
\end{align*}

No such extension is possible for an isolated theory of the semantics of the pluperfect that hinges on discourse relations.

From a theoretical standpoint, we return to an analysis of tense constructions whereby one and only one fact is pertinent: the temporal organization of eventualities. Tense constructions are analysed as being about tense, i.e., about time, not about contrasts, parallels, or rhetorical relations among discursive constituents.

\textbf{References}


