Present — Preterite: Tense and Narrative Point of View

1. Introduction*

Semantic description of verb tense yields problems within Dutch grammar. Attempts to characterise the meaning of verbal tenses in a rigorously temporal manner are unavailing. Everything seems to indicate that verbal tenses express more than the mere notion of past, present, and future which we associate with the phenomena of time.

In Dutch linguistics the present (ik loop ‘I am walking’, lit., I walk) and the preterite (ik liep ‘I walked’) are usually denoted by the terms onvoltoooid tegenwoordige tijd ‘imperfect present tense’ and onvoltoooid verleden tijd ‘imperfect past tense’. These terms do not yield an adequate description of the meaning of the present and the preterite. This can be elucidated with a few examples. The present is often used when in fact the past is being spoken of. This is called the historical present.

(1) Gisteren liep ik in het park, komt er opeens zo’n grote hond op me af
   ‘Yesterday I was walking in the park when suddenly this huge dog comes at me’

The preterite is frequently used as an irrealis, indicating a counterfactual or an optative: such cases feature something unreal, or a wish, or a desire.

(2) Als ik jou was, deed ik het
   ‘If I were you, I would do (lit. did) it’

(3) Hield hij nu maar eens op met praten
   ‘If only he stopped talking’

This indicates that we ought to aspire to a characterisation of the present–preterite opposition which is not strictly temporal. It is sometimes said of the present tense that it expresses nabijheid ‘proximity’, whereas the preterite expresses afstand ‘distance’ (Paardekooper 1957, Rijpma & Schuringa 1971). Other characterisations are: actualiteit ‘actuality’ versus inactualiteit ‘non-actuality’ (Bakker 1975), actual concern versus disactual concern (Janssen 1989; 1991), and realis versus hetero-realis (Balk-Smit Duyzentkunst 1963).
2. Verbal tense and narrative perspective

The linguistic issue of verbal tense can be approached by examining literary prose, including analysis of what is called narrative perspective. Inquiry into narrative perspective is presently the province of 'literature studies', but may with equal justice be deemed a concern of linguistic semantics.

Narrative perspective is the perspective which the narrator assumes while recounting a story, the point of view which he assumes, the position from which he considers events (Bal 1978). Accordingly, we discern a difference in point of view between a narrative told in the first person and one which is told in the third person.

Examination of a number of Dutch narratives, including both novels as well as short stories, demonstrates that there is a relationship between usage of either the first or the third person and the use of verb tense. The historical present or narrative present seems to occur more readily in first-person accounts than in third-person accounts. It occurs in 55% of the first-person narratives which I have investigated, while occurring in only 31% of the third-person accounts.

Further examination discloses another remarkable difference. For more than half of the first-person accounts in which the narrative present occurs it is true that the entire story is recounted in the present tense. A familiar example is Nooit Meer Slapen 'Ne'er More to Sleep' by Willem Frederik Hermans; further examples which merit mention are the short stories of authors such as Willem Elsschot, Simon Carmiggelt, Maarten Biesheuvel, Kees van Kooten, and Oek de Jong. Where the narrative present is encountered in third-person accounts, however, it is virtually always the case that only a few short passages are concerned while the rest of the narrative is recounted in the preterite. Third-person narratives recounted entirely in the present tense scarcely exist; rare exceptions are the novel Rolien en Ralien by Josepha Mendels and two short stories from the collection, In de bovenkooi 'Top Berth,' by Maarten Biesheuvel.

How can these results be explained? Why does the narrative present occur more readily in first-person than in third-person narratives? What does this tell us about the semantics of the present and the preterite?

3. The narrator and the narrative world

Someone who recounts a tale speaks concerning a reality — a reality in which events occur, in which the characters live, feeling, thinking, experiencing all kinds of things, ... The narrator can remain outside of the story while narrating it — beyond the narrative world, speaking as an outsider. Yet he can also step into that world and look at what is happening in terms of a perspective present within that world. It seems that the distinction between remaining outside of the narrative and stepping into it corresponds both to the distinction between the third and the first person as well as to that between the preterite and the present tense.

A first-person story is recounted by a narrator who is situated in the narrative world. The subject is the narrator. The character who experiences it all is himself narrating. A third-person account, however, is told by someone who is looking at a character —
someone who might even be located outside of the narrative world. Such a narrator possesses a sweeping overview of the entire situation and knows all kinds of things, perhaps even everything, about that character (Balk-Smit Duyzentkunst 1985). This is the difference between the first and the third person.

Balk-Smit Duyzentkunst (1963, 131) outlines the difference between the present and the preterite as follows:

Present: “in een tijd-ruimtelijke eenheid zich voltrekkend waaraan de taalgebruiker deel heeft” [taking place in a temporal-spatial dimension in which the language user is involved] — reals.

Preterite: “in een andere tijd-ruimtelijke eenheid zich voltrekkend dan één waaraan de taalgebruiker deel heeft” [taking place in a different temporal-spatial dimension than the one in which the language user is involved] — hetero-reals.

The present tense is thus utilised to present events as happening within the temporal-spatial dimension to which the narrator belongs, or, the narrator puts himself within the dimension of time and space of which he speaks. He places himself within the narrative world in which it all happens and sees everything facing him very directly.

The preterite, on the contrary, is utilised to present events as happening within a temporal-spatial dimension in which the narrator is not involved, or, the narrator puts himself beyond the dimension of time and space of which he speaks. It is far more a case of an overview, of overseeing it all, of distance, of remoteness, of looking at it all from beyond.

Such characterisations prove to furnish us insight into how finite verbs function in narrative texts. Using several passages from novels, I will demonstrate that the present tense indicates that the narrator places himself within the narrative world while the preterite indicates that he positions himself outside of it, regardless of whether the narrator is relating things concerning himself (first-person) or someone else (third-person). I will also offer an explanation for the fact that the present occurs more readily in a first-person than in a third-person narrative.

4. Third-person preterite

Let us consider a passage from a novel selected at random which is written in the third person preterite, Het Fregatschip Johanna Maria by Arthur van Schendel:

Op een morgen ontwaakte hij uit een droom met een droefheid die hem naar de verte deed staren gelijk hij eens als kind had gedaan. Het heimwee trok hem naar Amsterdam terug, hoewel hij wist dat hij er niets zou vinden dat hem dierbaar was, niets dan een stoep waar zijn zuster had gezeten, niets dan de herinnering aan een gelaat. Toch werd de hitte ondragelijk, de kleur van hemel, zee en bergen verveelde hem, de palmen hinderden hem; hij moest de grijze
lucht en de donkere grachten terugzien en de mensen van zijn stad weer hooren spreken. Zijn droefheid zag en hoorde niets dan Amsterdam.

(Arthur van Schendel, *Het Fregatschip Johanna Maria*, p.33)

[One morning he awoke from a dream of such sadness that it prompted him to gaze into the distance in the same manner as he had once done as a child. Nostalgia drew him back to Amsterdam although he knew that he would find nothing there that was dear to him, nothing but a curb where his sister had sat, nothing but the memory of her countenance. Still, the heat became unbearable, the colour of the sky, sea, and mountains bored him, the palms bothered him; he had to see once more the grey sky and the dark canals and to again hear the people of his town speaking. His despondency saw and heard nothing but Amsterdam.]

Here a narrator situated outside the narrative world is reporting something about a character. What is the sense of the preterite here? Does it indicate that the narrator is casting his glance back to the past? The issue of whether the preterite in fiction does or does not signify the past has generated substantial discussion within literature studies. An oft-heard suggestion is that it does possess the sense of past time in normal everyday language but not in fiction. In fiction the preterite indicates that the narration concerns a fictional world, a different world, an imaginary world — that it concerns a 'not-here-and-now.' Such a preterite is then called the *fictional* ('fictionalis'; Blok 1960) or the *epic preterite* (Hamburger 1957).

What is remarkable about this characterisation of the preterite in fiction offered by students of literature is that it is often equally true of the preterite in non-fiction, the preterite often being employed in everyday language for something unreal, as the *irrealis* examples show (*Als ik jou was, deed ik het* 'If I were you I would do it'; *Hield hij nu maar eens op met praten* 'If only he stopped talking').

The preterite, according to Balk-Smit Duyzentkunst (1963), indicates that one is speaking of something which is happening in a different sphere of time and space. This might furnish us with a characterisation valid for both the preterite in fiction and for the preterite in *irrealis* clauses, as well as for the preterite when actually employed in speaking of the past in the sense of time.

5. First-person preterite and present tense

Although the characterisation mentioned is quite plausible for a third-person preterite narrative, the question which now arises is: How can one account for the fact that the preterite occurs just as readily in first-person narratives? For in the latter case, the narrator is already situated within the narrative world, the narrator being at the same time the subject of the story. In response to this prima facie objection, it must be pointed out that a first-person narrative may require the ability to distinguish between the *narrating subject* and the *active subject* ('narrator-I' and 'character-I'; Bronzwaer 1970).
The narrating subject is the subject in his capacity as narrator whereas the active subject is the subject at the moment that he experiences it all. The narrating subject relates things concerning that active subject as though it concerned a character. This implies that in a first-person novel too, the preterite can signify that the narrator remains outside of the situation. It must be added that there is of course a very strong tendency to be completely submerged in the active subject, the narrating subject totally immersing himself in his former self. This is what happens when the narrative present occurs in a story. One actually places oneself in the temporal-spatial dimension in which one was situated at the time one experienced it.

The novel *Kaas 'Cheese'* by Willem Elsschot provides an example of a narrative subject being interchanged with an active subject. The subject of this tragi-comic story, Frans Laarmans, wants to relinquish his simple job as a clerk to become a merchant — a retailer of cheese. He is possessed by the feeling that he is now quite prominent and very important, and he foresees a lofty future for himself, but the people in his immediate environment see things differently.

Toen hij hoorde, dat mijn betrekking bij de General Marine and Ship-building in 't gedrang zou kunnen komen, kwam er een strenge trek op zijn open gezicht.
– Dat is een ernstige zaak, kerel, een verduiveld ernstige zaak.
En opeens liet hij mij staan en ging de keuken in.
– Heeft hij wel aanleg voor de handel? hoorde ik hem vragen.
– Ja, zei mijn vrouw, dat behoort hij toch zelf te weten.
– Een ernstige zaak, herhaalt hij.
– Dat heb ik hem ook gezegd.
Dat heeft zij ook gezegd. Zij! Zou je ze niet door de ruiten flikkeren? En intussen sta ik daar, als een grote nul.
Ik had maar net de tijd om bij wijze van protest de radio aan 't spelen te brengen, want daar kwam hij de veranda weer in.

(Willem Elsschot, *Kaas*, p.37-38)

[When he heard that my position at the General Marine and Ship-Building would be imperilled, a severe air altered his open face.
– That is a serious matter, old chap, a fiendishly serious matter.
Suddenly he turned away from me and went into the kitchen.
– Has he any aptitude for business? I heard him asking.
– Well, my wife said, oughtn't he to know that himself?
– A serious matter, he repeats.
– That is what I told him too.
That is what she said too. Her! They're looking to be chucked through the window panes is what they mean! Meantime I stand there looking like a king-size loser.
I had just enough time to get the radio playing by way of protest: he was already entering the veranda again.]

Notice that in the midst of this preterite narrative a present tense intrudes: *herhaalt hij* 'he repeats' and *sta ik daar* 'I stand there'. The perspective suddenly changes, and the subject is suddenly so engrossed in what he is telling and in what he has experienced.
that he places himself completely in the situation concerned. This perhaps indicates how we might explain why the narrative present occurs more readily in a first-person than in a third-person narrative. By the same token, it provides us a suggestion regarding the description of the sense of the present tense, viz., one situates oneself within the temporal-spatial dimension in which the events are taking place.

6. Third-person preterite and present tense

Supposing that the present does indeed have this meaning, how are we then to account for those cases in which the narrative present occurs in third-person narratives? In such cases, we cannot state that the narrator totally immerses himself in what he himself has experienced. A pertinent example is the novel Van Oude Menschen, de Dingen, die Voorbijgaan ‘Old People and the Things that Pass’ by Louis Couperus. Although almost the entire novel is third-person preterite, a narrative present passage does intervene.

This novel is the tale of two old people who carry a secret within themselves. They have a murder on their conscience — a crime of passion. They are perpetually tormented by their memories. It is beyond their capacity to let what has taken place sixty years ago truly belong to the past, no matter how much they would like to. The events simply will not pass ... Next to the perpetrators there is one other person, Harold, who has also carried the secret inside himself for sixty years. He saw what happened when he was a young boy. What he once saw he sees taking place before his very eyes again and again.

... Als een vizioen, álle de jaren van zijn leven, had hij het Ding weêr zien oprijzen, het vreeslijke Ding, dat daar gebaard en geboren was, in dien nacht, toen hij, zeker wat koortsig, niet had kunnen slapen onder den pletterzwaren nacht, die den regen nog omhoog hield, in sterke zeilen, die niet barsten konden, en geen adembare lucht doorlieten. Het vizioen, neen het Ding, het werkelijke Ding.

In de bergen, een eenzame pasangrahân; daar is hij alleen met zijn beide ouders, hij de kleine lieveling van zijn vader, die ziek is, en daarom verlof heeft gevraagd; de andere broêrs en zusters zijn gebleven in de stad, in het assistent-rezidentie-huis.

Hij kan niet slapen, en roept:
— Baboe, kom hier....
Zij antwoordt niet. Waar is zij?

[...]
de vaagte, het vage voortbewegen van iets, dat zij dragen. . . . van iemand, dien zij dragen, mama, meneer Emile, en Ma-Boeten. . . .

(Louis Couperus, Van Oude Menschen, de Dingen, die Voorbijgaan, 1, p.105-106, 109-110)

[. . . All the years of his life, he had seen the Thing rise up again, like a vision, the terrible Thing begotten and born in that night when, being no doubt a little feverish, he had been unable to sleep under the heavy, leaden night, which still held up the rain in powerful sails that could not burst and allowed no air through for him to breathe. The vision? No, the Thing, the actual Thing. . . .

A lonely pasangrahan in the mountains: he is there alone with his two parents, he the darling of his father, who is taking his sick-leave. The other brothers and the sisters have been left behind in the town, in the assistant-resident's house. He cannot sleep and he calls: ‘Baboe, come here! . . .’ She does not answer. Where is she?

[. . .]

The boy's teeth chatter and his eyes start from his head and his heart thumps, in his fever. He is mortally frightened, but he wants to see, too. He does not understand and, above all, he wants to see. His childish curiosity wants to see the terrible Thing which he does not yet understand. Silently, on his bare feet, he steals through the dark veranda. And, in the dim light of the night outside . . . he sees! He sees the Thing! A flash of lightning, terrible; a clap of thunder, as if the mountains were falling . . . and he has seen! He is now looking only at vagueness, the vague progress of something which they are carrying . . . of somebody whom they are carrying, Mamma, Mr Emile and Ma-Boeten.]

(Louis Couperus, Old People and the Things that Pass, p. 65, 67-68)

Blok (1960) points out that this passage acquires something subjective through the use of the present tense. The present reinforces the notion that we are here confronted with Harold's personal view. The present reinforces the subjectivity, generating identification and empathy with the character. This is, in my opinion, due to the fact that the present tense indicates that we are looking at it all from close by. The present signifies proximity as opposed to the preterite which indicates distance.

The preterite is employed when it is more a case of omniscience, of the all-encompassing vista of the narrator who is in position to obtain an overview of everything, looking on from a distance at the entire narrative world. The present tense, in contrast, thoroughly conducts us into that world, giving us the sense of no longer possessing an overview of the whole and of not being able to oversee it all. This is exactly what is happening here. We see things happening in the manner in which the young boy sees it all — we are looking alongside of him. Just as the older Harold finds himself submerged in that past, we, the narrator and the readers, have stepped into that same reality, putting
ourselves at the moment of time that Harold is a young boy, at the very place where he is himself then.

The manner in which the verb tenses function in the example above is actually equivalent to what we encountered earlier while examining a first-person narrative. The narrator places himself within the situation which is described. The fact that first-person narratives tend to employ this procedure more readily stems from the narrator's personal involvement with the events narrated while relating experiences he himself has undergone. Such strong involvement can lead to the narrator inadvertently becoming so engrossed in what he is telling that he shifts into the present tense — the ‘time’ at which the events actually happened.

7. Conclusion

Careful examination of narrative point of view in fiction can contribute to our understanding of tense semantics, clarifying the use of present and preterite tense in narrative prose. Preliminary study indicates that first-person narratives show a greater preference for the narrative present than do third-person narratives. In interpreting the significance of this uneven distribution, the characterisation provided by Paardekooper (1957) and Rijpma & Schuringa (1971) of the present – preterite opposition is serviceable: the present intimates proximity while the preterite suggests distance. Since a narrator tends to be more personally involved when relating events he himself has experienced, he will, consequently, be more inclined to interchange the present tense, which depicts events as being present at hand, with the preterite tense, which connotes a certain distance.

Janssen's (1989; 1991) characterisation is in agreement with this interpretation. By means of the present tense the speaker expresses the notion that an event is of actual concern to him: “... the speaker envisions himself as being strongly involved in the event.” The preterite expresses the notion that an event is of disactual concern to the speaker: “... the speaker sees the event ... as lying beyond his immediate or actual concern.” (Janssen 1991, 20)

Balk-Smit Duyzentkunst's (1963) characterisation of the present – preterite opposition is more to the point, however: The present tense indicates that the narrator is situated within the temporal and spatial bounds of the narrative world he sketches (realis) while the preterite indicates that he positions himself outside of that world (hetero-realitis). The fact that the narrative present occurs more frequently in first-person than in third-person narratives can be clarified as follows: When the concern is with personally experienced events, the narrator tends to immerse himself in those events and — in his imagination — to situate himself entirely within that situation, at the moment and location at which these occur.

Notes

* I am grateful to Frida Balk-Smit Duyzentkunst for the inspiration and guidance she has given to me during the research which preceded this article and for her comments on earlier versions. I would further like to thank John Rebel for the translation.
1. The present article is intended as a preliminary study. Further investigation will show to what extent wider significance may be claimed for the conclusions reached thus far. The material for my investigation to date consists of 89 narratives, of which 54 are first-person and 35 third-person. Included in the material are stories and novels by Hildebrand, Marcellus Emants, Frederik van Eeden, Louis Couperus, Arthur van Schendel, Willem Elsschot, Simon Vestdijk, Josepha Mendels, Albert van der Hoogte, Simon Carmiggelt, Marga Minco, Willem Frederik Hermans, Willem Brakman, Gerard Reve, Harry Mulisch, Rudy Kousbroek, Heere Heeresma, Cees Nooteboom, Maarten Biesheuvel, Kees van Kooten, Boudewijn Büch and Oek de Jong. The selection criterion which has been applied in our choice of prose texts is that they must form part of what is recognized as Dutch literature. Texts have been selected at random from the entire modern period (defined as beginning in 1815 at the University of Amsterdam’s Institute for Dutch Language Studies). The object of examination is the verb tense as well as the use of the first and the third person in the narrative text. Dialogues and quotations are excluded from consideration.

2. When it is stated that a narrative is in the present tense this means that it (virtually) employs only verb tenses in which the finite verb has the form of the present tense, whether it is a main verb or an auxiliary verb. When it is stated that a narrative is in the preterite this means that it (virtually) employs only verb tenses in which the finite verb has the form of the preterite, whether it is a main verb or an auxiliary verb.

3. This conclusion is in agreement with what Frey (1946) ascertains, to wit, that the historical present in oral narrations occurs chiefly when someone recounts something regarding what he himself has experienced, and rarely in narratives concerning things which one knows by conveyance through the agency of others.

4. A matter deserving investigation is to what extent this remains defensible in the case of what is known as free indirect discourse, which seems to display in large measure the perspective of a given character.

References


BLOK, W.

BRONZWAER, W. J. M.

FREY, JOHN R.

HAMBURGER, KÄTE

JANSSEN, THEO A. J. M.

PAARDEKOOPER, P. C.
1957 "De 'Tijd' als Spraakkunstgroep in het ABN." De Nieuwe Taalgids 50, pp.38-45.

RIJPMA, E. and F. G. SCHURINGA

Works Quoted

COUPERUS, LOUIS
1906 Van Oude Menschen, de Dingen, die Voorbijgaan. Amsterdam: Veen.

WILLEM ELLSCHOT

ARTHUR VAN SCHENDEL
1930 Het Fregatschip Johanna Maria. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff.