Is the Latin present tense the unmarked, neutral tense in the system?

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The present tense in Latin can be used for events that do not coincide with but either precede or follow the actual communicative situation in which the tense is used. In several recent studies this fact has been explained by assuming a neutral or non-temporal value for the present tense. This paper presents a detailed examination of the conditions under which the present tense is actually used, especially in past narratives in orations of Cicero. This examination shows that the present tense cannot be regarded as simply replacing other (past and future) tenses nor as simply replaceable by other tenses. It has its own semantic value in the overall tense system.

0. Introduction

In the Latin verbal system the present tense is the tense that a speaker or writer used to present events or situations as contemporaneous with the communicative setting in which he produced his utterance. A trivial example of this use is (1):

(1) aetatem meam scis? # scio esse grandem, item ut pecuniam. # certe edepol equidem te civem sine mala omni malitia semper sum arbitratus et nunc arbitror. # aurum huic olet. quid nunc me vis? # quoniam tu me et ego te qualis sis scio ... filiam tuam mi uxorem posco. (Pl. Aul. 214-219)

‘You know my age? # Getting on, getting on, I know that, financially too. # Now Euclio, I’ve always considered you a citizen of the true, trusty type, by Jove, I certainly have, and I do still. # He’s got a whiff of my gold. Well, what do you want? # Now that we appreciate each other, I’m going to ask you ... to give me your daughter in marriage.’

The decision to present something as contemporaneous with the speech situation or not is to some extent free and up to the speaker (writer).¹ A good example of the use of a non-present tense to refer to something which is actually taking place

¹. A number of ‘atypical’ uses of tenses are discussed by Klein (1994: 133-141).
in the speech situation is the so-called epistolary imperfect as in (2) (see Recanati 1995) and the so-called polite use of the imperfect as in (3) (see Pinkster 1990: 229):

(2) Nihil habebam quod scriberem. (Cic. Att. 9.10.1)
   ‘I have nothing to write.’

(3) sed si domi est, Demaenetum volebam. (Pl. As. 452)
   ‘But I wished to see Demaenetus, if he is at home.’

In (2) Cicero reports he has nothing to write about while writing and in (3) Demaenetus is wanted at that very moment. Still, for reasons well discussed in the literature, the speaker (writer) locates the events outside the communicative setting and chooses the imperfect tense. In a similar way the present tense is used in situations in which a purely chronometric point of view a future or past tense might be possible or even more appropriate. In (4), for example, the meal will take place later, in the evening of that day, and in (5) the speaker has heard the news before uttering audio.

(4) et is hodie apud me cenat et frater meus; (Pl. Str. 415)
   ‘And now he’s to dine with me today, he and my brother too;’

(5) ... id ego feci et fateor. # quid ego ex te audio? (Pl. Aul. 734)
   ‘... I’m to blame, and I confess it, sir. # Why? What’s that?’

From Antiquity onwards philosophers and linguists have found difficulty in explaining the use of the present tense in utterances referring to events that are, strictly speaking, situated outside the communicative setting of the Speaker and Addressee or in utterances that refer, more narrowly, to events situated before or after the speech situation. Philosophers have time and again denied that there is such a thing as a ‘now’ in the ongoing movement of time.6 In view of the use of the present in such situations many linguists have objected to defining the value of the present tense as ‘presents the state of affairs as simultaneous with the communicative setting (or: the speech situation)’.

Several latins working in a more or less strictly defined structural framework (Serbat in several publications, most recently 1988; Mellet 1985; Mellet et al. 1994: 21-52; Moralejo 1988; Touratier 1994: 94-101; 1996) regard the present tense as the ‘unmarked’, ‘neutral’, ‘zero’ or ‘atemporal’ tense in the overall tense system, which explains why it can be used instead of other tenses.3 Similar views were held by diachronically working linguists in the beginning of this century who explained the historical present as a variety of the ‘achronistic’ or ‘timeless’ value of the present tense, which can be found from Indo-European onwards (a summary in Bennett 1910:10-17). Serbat (1976) and Mellet (1985) have also drawn attention to the fact that most present tense forms can be described as morphologically unmarked (ama-t : ama-ba-t and ama-bi-t).4

The use of the present as a narrative tense to refer to past events and situations (the so-called historical present) is a special point in case. In structural approaches to the tense system this use of the present is taken as further evidence for the unmarked value of the present. Quantitative observations are also taken as support for this approach: the present is so overwhelmingly frequent that it is best taken as a basic narrative tense tout court.

The same quantitative observations are also the starting point for Von Albrecht’s article (1970) on the use of the tenses in Virgil. According to Von Albrecht the present and the perfect are exchangeable as far as their semantic value is concerned (1970: 224) and literary artists, Virgil in particular, use the choice between them to structure the narrative and to highlight certain episodes by using the perfect tense.5 In fact, Mellet’s (1985) article, while assuming a non-temporal function for the present tense, discusses the function of the perfect much along the same lines.

In traditional attempts to explain the historical present psychological (or stylistic, in the terminology of Szantyr, p. 307) considerations have been brought forward. In this approach the speaker/author presents the event as ‘present’ (or: ‘actual’) although, using a stopwatch or some other time measuring device, the event is not really ‘present’ or ‘actual’. Quintilian’s description of the use of the present in past narratives as an instance of metaphor (Inst. 9.2.41-43, 9.3.11) is the earliest along these lines (cf. Weinrich 1964: ch. 5). In my (1983) paper I have also described the use of the historical present basically along these lines, viz. as a way of presenting past events as if it were an eyewitness account.

I will once more try to demonstrate that the present tense is excluded in certain contexts and situations and that, conversely, when the present is used, the Latin present tense

3. Moralejo makes a distinction between ‘unmarked’ and ‘negative’ use of the present tense for the historical and future use on the one hand and the actual present on the other. Objections in Touratier (1994). Recent discussions of a general character can be found in Fleischman (1990, especially ch. 2) and Recanati (1999).

4. Reservations on the usefulness of this type of consideration can be found in Moralejo (1988:30).

5. Von Albrecht’s article, inspiring as it is, has had some influence on commentators, especially his idea that the present and perfect are in principle exchangeable. See, for example, Töchterle (1994) ad Sen. Oed. 48, 133ff. I have formulated my criticism of this article in Pinkster (1993: 309-310).

2. For a historical survey of the debate see Serbat (1976) and Mellet et al. (1994).
The best description of the use of the present for states of affairs that are, strictly speaking, situated after the speech situation is still Sjögren (1906). From this study it has become clear that there are specific situations in which the future cannot be replaced by the present and, conversely, also specific uses of the present which cannot be replaced by the future. Examples of both types are (6)-(8) and (9)-(13), respectively:

(6) Hoc quidem hercle, quoquo ibo, mecum erit, mecum feram, neque isti id in tantis periclis umquam eommittam ut siet. (Pl. Aut. 449-450)
'By heaven, wherever I go this goes too: I won't leave it there to run such risks never.'

(7) multa scio facienda verba. ibo intro. sed apertast foris. (Pl. St. 87)
'It'll take a lot of talking, that's sure. Well. I'll go in. But the door's open.'

(8) accedam propeius. (Pl. Cas. 577)
'I'll step up to her.'

Sjögren has numerous examples to show that in asides such as (6)-(8), but also in other types of context the future is required.

(9) mane modo istic, iam revertor ad te. (Pl. Ps. 1156-1159)
'Wait! I'll soon be back. But hurry fast, for I am in a hurry: you see how late it is already. I see. I only want a little advice from him. Just you wait there: I'll soon rejoin you.'

(10) salve, mi pater. et vos ambae. illico agite adsidite. # osculum. # sat est osculi mihi vostri. # qui, amabo, pater? # quia ita meae animae salursa event. # adside hic, pater. # non sedo isti, vos sedete; ego sedero in subsellio. # mane, pulvinum—# bene procuus. mihi satis sic fultumst. sede. # sine, pater. (Pl. St. 90-95)
'Good morning, father dear! Same to you both. That'll do, that'll do, sit down! Just a kiss. I've had enough of your kissing. Oh, father dear, how can you say that? Because it already has made my breath briny. Sit down here, father. Not I, you two sit there. I'll sit on this bench myself. # Wait, a cushion! # You do take good care of me. There, there, that's plenty of propping. Sit down. # Just one more, father.'

Example (9) is an illustration of the use of the present tense referring to an event that is going to take place in the near future in the communicative setting. Expressions of the type 'I'll be back in a second' are normally in the present tense. The future form revertar in line 1159 of this example seems to be an exception. It has been noted by Sjögren (1906: 8) that the verb reverti has always future tense in Plautus, as in this example, suggesting that this is a lexical feature of reverti. However, reverti is not used in the same type of context as redire and this explains...
the difference in use of the tenses. In (10) we have an example of the use of the present in negative reactions to commands or invitations. In (11) we see one of the rare combinations of *eras* with a present tense form, for something that is fixed in the calendar. (13), finally, expresses Amphitruo’s amazement and impatience when he finds his door closed. As Sjögren has shown, in all these circumstances the present is required or at least preferred.

The examples show that, measuring by the stopwatch, there are situations in which the present is used to refer to events ‘after now’. Even so there seem to be different rules governing the use of the future and that of the present, and there is no reason to call one or the other unmarked or neutral. Given the fact that the present is not really used ‘instead of’ the future, it is also questionable whether there is a need for characterising the use of the present in these cases as ‘more decisive’, or ‘more urgent’, as some linguists and philologists do.

2. The present tense used to refer to general events

Another use of the present tense is its use in statements about general truths, as in (14), an example discussed by Serbat (1976) and Touratier (1994):

(14) *audentes fortuna iuvat.* (Verg. A. 10.284)

‘Fortune aids the daring.’

Although it is true that this statement is meant to be relevant in a general way to all periods of mankind, it is nonetheless presented as a general truth that is relevant in the communicative setting. This becomes clear if we replace the present tense form by either a future or a past tense form. The statement will remain a general statement, but, if stated in the future or past form, not be considered relevant to

7. The future form *revortar* is either used for someone entering the scene or when there is some doubt about how much time it will take for someone to return.

8. The normal tense is the future. Indicative present tense forms are rare among the instances mentioned in *TLL*, s.v. 1099.29ff. Another example, where the future is impossible, is *Cic. Fam.* 16.23.2 *crae exspecto Leptam* (‘tomorrow I am expecting Lepta’). Different analysis is possible for the only indicative instance in *Plautus*:

- In (10) we have an example of the use of the present in negative reactions to commands or invitations. In (12) we see one of the rare combinations of *eras* with a present tense form, for something that is fixed in the calendar. (13), finally, expresses Amphitruo’s amazement and impatience when he finds his door closed. As Sjögren has shown, in all these circumstances the present is required or at least preferred.

9. So, for example, Sandström (p. 308).


11. ... tuam, ut *dixisti*, mihi desponde filiam. (Pl. *Poes. 1357*) ‘... promise me your daughter as you said.’

3. The present tense used to refer to past events in non-narrative texts

Before passing to the much debated issue of the historical present I will present a few examples in which the present refers to events, which ‘on the stopwatch’, are past:

(15) ... *id ego feci et fateor. # quid ego ex te audior?* (Pl. *Aul. 734*)

‘... I’m to blame, and I confess it, sir. # Hey? What’s that?’

(16) *verum quod tu dixis, mea uxor, non te mi irasci decet.* (Pl. *Am. 522*)

‘But as to what you say, precious, you oughtn’t to be cross with me.’

(17) *Calchantem augurem scribit Homerus longe optumum fuisse.* (Cic. *Div. 1.87*)

‘For example, Homer writes that Calchas was by far the best augur...’

In (15) *audi* refers to the immediately preceding words. In (16) Alcumena’s words are eight lines back, after an interruption of Alcumena’s and Jupiter’s conversation by Mercury. Examples like these are quite common (Kühner-Stegmann: I, 117-118). In the Plautine cases (Lodge 1924: 189) of surprised or indignant questions as in (15), where the content of the information is the focal element, the present seems to be required. The perfect is found when the fact of hearing or the location in time is focal. Something similar seems to be the case in Cicero’s use of *audi* vs *audivi* in the Verrine orations. Back reference to the words of a partner in a dialogue as in (16) and in expressions like *ut dixisti* (Lodge 1924: 383) in the present tense is normal. In the only *ut dixistis* example in *Plautus* the focal element is the fact that the partner has promised to do something earlier in the comedy (in line 1157). (17) is an instance of the so-called citative use of the present, also a quite common phenomenon. Wisse (1996) demonstrates that pragmatic differences of the type just mentioned correlate with the use of the present and perfect in Cicero’s use of *dicere*.

the actual communicative setting. Therefore, I would not call the use of the present tense in such statements unmotivated or unmarked.
In (18) below, the old man Simo has left the house and, alone on the scene, is talking to himself (or the audience). *Iubet* definitely refers to a suggestion of his wife in the preceding scene. However, her order is still relevant for the present moment, as the adverb *nunc* shows. She still wants Simo to go to bed. In (19) *venis* refers to the arrival of Pamphilippus, which actually has taken place some time ago. The Loeb translation runs: 'How long since you got into port?'. It is explained, as the earlier example, as a past event having current relevance by Kühner-Stegmann (I, p. 117) and by Petersmann (1973) a. l., but it is surely the most problematic one among the 'present perfect' instances given in Bennett (1910: 17-18). My explanation is that Epignomus is not asking when his brother arrived, but expresses his amazement at the fact that he is arriving so late. I therefore prefer an exclamation mark instead of a question mark.

(18) *prandium uxor mihi perbonum dedit, nunc dormitum iubet me ire: minime. (Pl. Mos. 692.693)"

‘That was a luscious lunch my wife gave me! And now she tells me to go and take a nap! Not a bit of it!’

(19) *sed eccum fratrem Pamphilippum, incedit cum socero suo. # quid agitur, Epignome? # quid tu? quam dudum in portum venis! # hue longissume postilla.' (Pl. St. 527-529)

But there’s my brother Pamphilippus strolling along with his father-in-law. # How goes it, Epignomus? # And with you? How late that you got into port! # Here a long time thereafter.’

The examples of the present in utterances referring to the past discussed so far are the counterpart of the *praesens pro futuro* instances discussed in section 1. There are distributional differences between the present when used to refer to past events and the perfect which can best be explained on the basis of their semantic values.

4. The use of the present tense in past narratives

I will now turn to the historical present, which has provoked energetic discussions among latinists until quite recently. I will summarize well-known observations made on the comedies of Plautus and Terence and then proceed to two narrative pieces in orations of Cicero.

In Plautus and Terence, whenever one of the characters describes past events in the present tense, ambiguity in the speech situation between ‘actual’ and ‘historical’ present is avoided by various signals such as introductory or concluding perfect tenses and/or situating adverbs and connectors, such as *ibi* and *aper ... illi* in the following examples (Heinze 1924; Hofmann 1950: 173). Such expressions facilitate the interpretation of the change from ‘here and now’ to ‘there and then’.

(20) *postquam illam sunt conspicatae, quam tuo’ gnatus deperit: "quam facile et quam fortunate evenit illi, opsecro, mulieri quam liberare volt amator!" "quisnam is est?" inquit ahera illi. ibi illa nominat Stratippoclem. (Pl. Epid. 242-245)

‘After they spied that girl your son is daft over: “Mercy me,” says she, “the easy, lucky way things do come to that girl, with her lover wanting to set her free!” “Who on earth is he?” says the other. Then the first one names him, Stratippocles, the son of Periphanes.’

Another type of text where it is essential to mark the transition to the historical present is the *narratio* in Cicero’s orations. Just as in the interactive situation on the stage in the Plautine examples, Cicero has to avoid misunderstandings.

(21) *forte fortuna per impluvium huc despexi in proxumum: atque ego illi aspicio osculantem Philocomasium cum ahero nescioquo adulescente. (Pl. Mil. 287-289)"

‘I just happened to happen to look down through the skylight into the house next door here, and there I spied Philocomasium and some other young fellow kissing each other.’

The sentences with a historical present are embedded in the discourse structure and occur in that part of the narrative which Labov (1972: 354-396) labels ‘complicating action’ (cf. Myhill 1992: 62 ff., Chafe 1994: 207-210). The effect of this is that particularly salient or dramatic events are highlighted in the form of some sort of eyewitness account. This use of the present is no problem for those linguists who, like myself, describe the semantic value of the present tense roughly as ‘presenting the event as simultaneous with the speech situation’.

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dings on the part of his audience, the jury. An illustration is the narratio in his pro Milone (24-29), in which he tells the story of Clodius' and Milo's preparations, encounter and fight, ending in Clodius' death. The narratio is clearly introduced as such in the following way:

(22) Quod quo facilius argumentis perspicere possitis, rem gestam vobis dum breviter expono, quaes, diligenter attendite. (Cic. Mil. 23)

And in order that the light of proofs you may get a clearer view of this question, please give me your careful attention while I lay before you a short narrative of the occurrence.

The section with Clodius' preparations takes about one half of the narratio and is set in preterite tenses throughout. In § 27 Cicero takes his time in describing Clodius' departure (profectus est, profectus est). Then, in § 28, he turns to his client Milo, initially continuing with perfect tense forms:

(23) Milo autem cum in senatu fuisset eo die, quoad senatus est dimissus, domum Clodius' departure (pro Milone)

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(24) (background information in imperfect tense forms about the commander Cleomenes) Ecco autem repetitio ebro Cleomenes, esuriens ceteris navibus in portu Odysseae; nam ita est locus nominatur; nostra autem classis erat in portu Pachyni. (Cic. Ver. 5.87)

And now, while Cleomenes was drunk and his men starving, the news suddenly arrived that there were pirate ships in the harbour of the place known as Odyssey, our fleet being in the harbour of Pachynus.

In this passage the historical present is preceded by three signals 'transition to a new stage or step in the narrative' (Kroon 1995: 110) in Sicily. The episode differs in several respects from the narratio in the pro Milone. In the first place, it is much longer and much more detailed. Apart from evaluative comments, rhetorical questions, exclamations and parts of the narrative in direct speech, Cicero at certain points in the narrative provides his audience with geographical and historical background information for their better understanding. An example of a succession of a historical present and actual, geographical information is the following:

(25) (background information in imperfect tense forms about the commander Cleomenes) Ecce autem repetitio ebro Cleomenes, esuriens ceteris navibus in portu Odysseae; nam ita est locus nominatur; nostra autem classis erat in portu Pachyni. (Cic. Ver. 5.87)

At the critical moment of the confrontation between Milo and Clodius Cicero shifts from the perfect to the present tense, but only so in the main clauses. The ut fit expression in the series of perfects cannot cause ambiguity, since it can only be interpreted as a statement of Cicero outside the story line proper. Interesting is the relative clause qui animo fidelis ... fuerunt with a perfect form (and not the imperfect erant), which is a statement of Cicero outside the storyline expressing his subjective, moral judgement about the behaviour of these slaves instead of a description of their personal qualities. The perfects occis sunt ... fuerunt conclude the narratio, the end of which is explicitly indicated by Cicero. There are two extra signals for the audience to mark the shift to a more dramatic narrative mode, viz. the placement of the verb phrases obviam fit and fit obviam in sentence initial position and the sentence initial position of statim. Notice that in this narratio the present tense forms are in the minority and that they occur in a cluster.

Another beautiful narrative piece can be found in the last of the Verrine orations, in which Cicero describes the disaster of the Roman fleet (5.86-110) in Sicily. The episode differs in several respects from the narratio in the pro Milone. In the first place, it is much longer and much more detailed. Apart from evaluative comments, rhetorical questions, exclamations and parts of the narrative in direct speech, Cicero at certain points in the narrative provides his audience with geographical and historical background information for their better understanding. An example of a succession of a historical present and actual, geographical information is the following:

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p. 45-46; see also Chausserie-Lapré 1969, especially p. 547, n. 2). The geographical background information speaks for itself both because of the meaning of *ita ... nominatur*, but also because of the presence of *nam*. The return to the storyline is clear from the imperfect tense *erat.*

There is another interesting difference between the historical presents and the actual presents in this narratio. Whereas the historical presents often occupy the first position of their sentence or clause, this is exceptional for actual presents, as can be seen in table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>In first position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>actual present</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>historical present</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perfect</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imperfect</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: position in the sentence or main clause of tense forms in Cic. *Ver.* 5.86-110

16. Since Cicero switches often from his own position to the past and back, the interpretation of present forms may become difficult, at least for some time. This is illustrated by:

*... ut *videbat* ...*  

his first plan was foolish, but still not cruel. He sent for the captains, and when they appeared, reprimanded them for talking about him as they had; he then requested that each of them would state that he had had the proper number of sailors in his ship, and that no one had been exempted from duty. 

18. For Verb Subject ordering in narrative texts see also Bolkestein (1995a: 42) and Chausserie-Lapré (1969: 350) on this very passage of Cicero.

19. *4x1, 2x2, 2x4, 2x5, 1x7, 1x12, 1x13.*

20. Bolkestein (1995a) also notes a correlation between Verb Subject sentences and lack of connecting devices.

21. *responderit* is the reading of some recentiores, accepted by Kloetz in his Teubner edition. The older manuscripts have *reponsit*, which is accepted by Peterson in his OCT.
charge we are considering. I take it that the fool’s own councillors laughed at him, and pointed out to him ...

The historical present is much more frequent in this passage than the perfect. As I said already, some scholars take this in itself as an argument for describing the historical present as an unmarked tense. Still, the frequency of the historical present does not make its use plain or ordinary. As we see, there are additional distributional characteristics which bear similarity to what we know of the use of the historical present in modern languages (see the discussion on narrative ‘peaks’ in Longacre 1983: 25-38, Fleischman 1990: 211 on ‘pacing the discourse’ and already Schlicher 1931) and which typically befit salient passages in narrative texts. See also my visualisation of the use of the tenses in this passage in figure 1 on the next page.

All this suggests that the historical presents in this text cannot be simply replaced by perfect forms. If we now turn to the perfect forms, especially to one of the cases where more perfects occur in succession, it is quite obvious that many of them cannot be replaced by present forms either.

(26) (After preparations) Egreditur in Centuripina quadrirerni Cleomenes e portu; sequitur Segestana navis ... Tam diu in imperio suo classem iste praetor diligens vidit quam diu convivium eius flagitiosissimum praeterveeta est; ipse autem, qui visus multis diebus non esset, tum se tamen in conspectum nautis paulisper dedit. Stetit soleatus praetor populi Romani cum pallio purpureo tunicaque talari muliercula nixus in litore. Nam hoc istum vestitu Siculi civesque Romani permulti saepe viderunt (Cic. Ver. 5.86) ‘Cleomenes sailed out of the harbour in the Centuripan ship, a quadrireme, followed by the ship of Segesta ... All that our governor saw of this fleet that was under his authority was during the time it sailed past the scene of his shameful carousals; he himself had been invisible for many days, but on this occasion he did for a few moments show himself to his sailors. That Roman governor stood there on the shore in slippers, wearing a purple Greek cloak and a long-skirted tunic, and leaning on one of his women; and often enough before that had any number of Sicilians and Romans citizens seen him in this costume.’

22. Replacement of the present is certainly not possible where in subordinate clauses present consecutio is observed, as with habuerint and dicit in this passage. There are also cases where the present is similar to an imperfect as far as background status is concerned (various contributions by Kravar, among these 1973). 23. I follow Klotz’ Teubner text in reading nam (Ernesti instead of iam, codd.) and viderant (codd.). Peterson, in his OCT, keeps iam and follows Benedictus in reading viderant.
In the passage quoted under (26) the sentence with 
\textit{vidit} is a comment of Cicero
outside the storyline about Verres' general practice (\textit{in imperio suo}) (note also the evaluative adjective \textit{flagitiosissimum}). The final sentence with \textit{vidit} is a statement outside the storyline, whatever reading we choose. In this type of comments about past events that do not form part of the storyline the perfect cannot be replaced by a present tense. Only truly narrative perfects may be replaced by present tense forms, but, as I have tried to show, on condition that the speaker thinks it is appropriate\textsuperscript{26} in the order of the story, and in combination
with a number of other — syntactic — features.\textsuperscript{27} The function of the narrative perfects, which are by no means always easy to distinguish from 'authorial' perfects, seems to be to switch from the speaker's situation to the past and back. In this way both uses (authorial and narrative)\textsuperscript{28} are in accordance with the function of the perfect in the tense system, presenting states of affairs as anterior to, finished or ended before, the speech situation.\textsuperscript{27}

It is a well-known fact that the Roman historians and epic poets frequently use the present as a narrative tense and sometimes even as the main narrative tense.\textsuperscript{29} The high frequency is to some extent caused by the fact that the present is not only used to report ongoing actions, but also to give background information, which is one of the main functions of the imperfect.\textsuperscript{29} However, Chausserie-Lapnè (1969: 372) and others have shown that in certain identical syntactic configurations (for example the 'cum inversum' construction) the present and the perfect seem to be exchangeable in the \textit{cum}-clause. It is quite possible that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} "Evidently conversational narrators have a tendency to slip into the historical present at points in their talk where there is some reason for a remembered event or state to be expressed in a way that more closely resembles the immediate mode, a strategy likely to be most appropriate at, or shortly before, the climax of a narrative." (Chafe 1994: 209-210).
\item \textsuperscript{25} As a consequence, the proportion of historical presents among the truly narrative past tenses is even higher than table 1 suggests. It is extremely likely that the syntactic phenomena referred to were combined with a specific intonational contour, speed, volume, pauses to create tension, etc.
\item \textsuperscript{26} What I have called 'authorial' and 'narrative' perfects corresponds roughly to distinctions like \textit{present perfect} (sometimes called 'perfective perfect' or 'perfectum præsens') and \textit{historical perfect} (sometimes called 'aoristic perfect') (Pinkster 1990: 229-232). The notion 'aoristic' (German 'auktorial') stems from narratological studies in the tradition of Stanzel. It is also used by Klug (1992), Kroon & Rose (1996), and Kroon (this vol.).
\item \textsuperscript{27} For a survey of the situations in which a perfect is preferred see Schlicher (1931: 56-59) and Chausserie-Lapnè (1969: 371-373, 554, n. 1).
\item \textsuperscript{28} Quinn (1968: 93, note 1), for example, states that in Virgil's time the use of the historical present had become a stylistic mannerism. \textsuperscript{29} Mellet (1985) makes no distinction among the historical presents between those that resemble imperfect forms and those that resemble perfect forms in their behaviour. Dragoneiti (1981: 72) has the following figures from Apuleius' \textit{Psyche} story (main clauses, direct speech excluded):
\begin{align*}
\text{imperfect} & \quad 64 \text{ present (impf.)} & 88 \\
\text{perfect} & \quad 101 \text{ present (perf.)} & 145
\end{align*}
\end{itemize}

30. The use of the tenses in literary fiction may be different from their use in (literary) historical narrative. See Vuillaume (1990). In Antiquity, the two types were probably not so far apart (cf. Klug 1992: 10). The best discussion of all this can be found in Fleischman (1990).

31. He calls the present an 'initiativtempus' (Klug 1992: 35) used for "vorwirrungsendende oder verändernde Handlungsininitiative" (ibid., 101).
"introduisant l’oracle fatal qui va bouleverser la destinée de Psyche" (Mellet 1985: 150). Rather it is "The most striking, one might almost say blatant, manifestation of the authorial presence" (Kenney 1990: 23).

The present seems to be inappropriate in descriptions of extreme cruelty, such as the killing of Priam in Virgil A. 2.550-553 (four coordinated perfects on a row). In using the perfect Aeneas reports the events as an objective outsider, creating distance, and in this way stressing the gruesome outcome of the events (cf. Quinn 1968: 93, note 1). In these types of text, too, there are limitations on the use of the present.

5. Conclusion

I have tried to show that for each of the types of situations where the present seems to be used or is used without referring to the speaker’s now there are certain restrictions and conditions which distinguish the present from other tenses. The reverse holds as well. The present cannot be substituted for other tenses in all situations. From this I conclude that the present has its own place in the tense system with a specific, ‘positive’, semantic value of its own: ‘presenting a state of affairs as contemporaneous with the speech situation’, rather then regarding it as a tense indicating as its basic meaning ‘atemporality’.

It has been observed by Moralejo (1988) and others (for example Fleischman 1990: 53-54) that in the classical theory of markedness the fact that the present tense has a specific function of its own is not incompatible with its being the unmarked member in the set of tenses. In its ‘minus-interpretation’ (Fleischman) the present may specifically refer to the speech situation. This may be so. However, in order to describe the specific effects of, for example, the historical present, it has to be assumed in the theory of markedness that the atemporal present is used to refer to past events while keeping its ‘minus-interpretation’ ‘here and now’. For me, this is one step too much.\footnote{I would like to thank Daan den Hengst, Machtelt Bolkestein, and Caroline Kroon for their critical observations on a preliminary version of this paper and Mathieu de Bakker for his assistance.}

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