"Historical Present" in Middle English Yet Again
Its Interpersonal and Textual Meanings*

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I. Introduction

The present tense has been used in alternation with the preterite (PR) in English narratives since the Old English period. Similar uses of the present tense have been documented in narratives of other Indo-European languages as well. This use of the present tense has been called historical or historic present (HP). Kiparsky succinctly summarizes a typical traditional view of HP as follows:

... in using the present tense the narrator becomes closely involved in the story and relates it as if he were an eyewitness to the action, or wished to convey to the listener the dramatic feeling of being an eyewitness. (1968, 30)

Kiparsky argues that while the above traditional notion is true of HP in modern European languages, it is irrelevant to apply to the narrative present tense in older Indo-European languages such as Old Norse, Old Irish and Greek. He concludes that it is for a syntactic reason that the present tense is used in narrative, and that HP is indistinguishable from the past tense in terms of semantics.

Turning to Middle English, we find earlier instances of HP in verse narratives like The Lay of Havelok the Dane and King Horn written in the early fourteenth century.1 And in the late fourteenth century, in Chaucer’s multifarious verse narratives, HP is used quite extensively.

A great number of studies have contributed to our understandings of the use of HP and its various effects in English. With regard to HP in Middle English verse narratives, there are varying views on its possible meanings and effects, e.g., vividness, a dramatic effect, and durative aspect. As for HP in Present-Day English, Wolfson’s studies have provided a more systematic explanation of this seemingly abrupt linguistic phenomenon (1978; 1979; 1981; 1982). Although she restricts the scope to the conversational American English narratives, and does not claim any cross-linguistic universality of her findings, her sociolinguistic studies have significant implications in studying HP in other languages in various historical periods.

Numerous studies have followed Wolfson. Of these, at least, Schiffrin (1981), Fludernik (1991), and Fleischman (1985; 1989; 1990) are relevant to the present study. And among these, Fleischman’s approach notably attempts to provide a comprehensive and holistic study of the issue, in that it has revealed the multi-dimensional nature of HP.2 Fleischman applies the Hallidayan framework to explicate uses and effects of HP in narratives of different genres in various languages, but mainly those in Medieval Romance languages. More specifically, she examines uses of HP at the ideational, interpersonal, textual and metalinguistic levels.3
Following up Fleischman’s seminal work, in the present paper, I will propose that HP realizes metaphorical meanings based upon the ideational lexicogrammatical property of the present tense. First, I will provide a brief summary of the relevant literature. Then, I will propose specific meanings realized by HP in Middle English verse narratives. Third, I will present several representative excerpts taken mainly from The Knight’s Tale (KnT) to illustrate my discussion. Finally, I will briefly touch upon the optional nature of this stylistic device.

II. Review of the literature: From sociolinguistics to literary stylistics

The following review of the relevant literature provides an overall picture of what has been claimed about HP. A view that is commonly held is that HP is a metaphorical use of tense. This view derives, in part, from the fact that tense behaves differently in narrative. For instance, Dahl states that in narrative, “since the point of reference is by definition determined by the context, any further indication of its location in time will be redundant” (1985, 127). It is quite natural, therefore, that HP might mean something other than the basic meaning of tense. Even if one disagrees with the view that the present tense marker loses its temporal referential meaning in a particular context, one may still accept that HP is a metaphorical use of tense, e.g., Declerck (1991, 69). Then the next logical question is, “What metaphorical meaning(s)?”

In a series of studies of CHP (conversational historical present), Wolfson has pointed out that the use of HP does not have any significance per se, but that it is switching between HP and PR that creates an effect in American English oral narratives, namely, an effect of setting off a portion of a story. Her argument is based on the fact that the same tense-form tends to cluster together in sequences of narrative, and that this creates a scene or sub-unit in a narrative. This can be taken to mean that switching is used to realize one prominent textual meaning, i.e., cohesion.

Schiffrin (1981) disagrees with Wolfson, saying that HP itself carries a significant meaning, and observes an interpersonal aspect of HP. Applying Labov’s (1972) thesis of evaluation in narrative, Schiffrin argues that HP is an internal evaluation device.

According to Labov, “internal evaluation is realized by relatively minor syntactic elements in the narrative clause: intensifiers, comparators, correlativeas, explicatives” (1972, 378), while external evaluation is realized by independent and embedded evaluation clauses. These evaluative components are essential in narrative, in that it is through evaluative language that the hearer recognizes the point of a narrative. In other words, evaluation makes a given narrative “tellable” or worth telling. Applying Labov’s argument to HP, Schiffrin argues as follows:

The HP is an INTERNAL EVALUATION DEVICE: it allows the narrator to present events as if they were occurring at that moment, so that the audience can hear for itself what happened, and can interpret for itself the significance of those events for the experience. (1981, 59)

In other words, Schiffrin claims that the function of HP in narrative is a blend of the traditional notion of “vividness” and Labov’s notion of narrative evaluation. The above argument implies that the temporal information of the present tense marker is somehow
used metaphorically to express "vividness" or "immediacy," and, furthermore, to realize evaluative meaning.

Fludernik criticizes both Wolfson and Schiffrin, saying that they do not go beyond Labovian notions of evaluation in their analyses of HP in narrative discourse (1991, 368). She argues that the direction of switching denotes a difference in meaning, when switching occurs on the plot line of narrative (namely, abstract, orientation, incipit, complicating action, resolution, final evaluation and coda). That is, switching from PR to HP and uses of HP mark an indication of a "turn" of events, and serve as a marker for "foregrounding" the tellability of that turn. On the other hand, switching from HP to PR signals "narrative point," i.e., results and reactions that occur in the wake of turns. In Hallidayan terms, switching indicates both textual and interpersonal meanings (from PR to HP), or interpersonal meaning (HP to PR), depending on the direction of the switch. Fludernik's argument certainly explains why it is that tense-switching from PR to HP often signals the beginning of a new scene and that from HP to PR the resolution of a certain action taken place in that scene. However, the above summary clearly indicates a problematic aspect of the argument. First, the complete correlation of significance with foregrounding is not true of many instances, as Wolfson has demonstrated. Second, the definition of a "turn," as Fludernik admits, is left rather vague (Fludernik 1991, 391). The latter problem has resulted in Fludernik's analyzing two spoken narratives in a way that makes us wonder what exactly she means by this very notion. The following excerpt from her reanalysis of Schiffrin's data illustrates this point:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fludernik's notation</th>
<th>Schiffrin's notation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>turn</td>
<td>and all of a sudden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the buzzer sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turn</td>
<td>and all these guys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hh come hh out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td>and we didn't know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>what t' do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cause we were stuck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>So we asked some guy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t' come over an' HELP US.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPISODE TWO:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>So he opens the car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and everyone gets out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>except me and my girlfriend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And all of a sudden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>he gets in the car,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sits down,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and starts t' turn on the motor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(From “Narrative Turn and the Foregrounding of Event Tellability,” in Text Discourse, and Narrative, ed. by B. Thompson, J. S. D. Thompson, and J. M. Thompson, 241-272, 1991.)

First, it is perplexing to find that every instance of HP marks a "turn" and is regarded as an "episode-internal turn" (Fludernik 1991, 377), except for the one occurring at the
beginning of the second episode. Furthermore, the above excerpt clearly indicates that deciding what constitutes a turn seems more random than that; the first two clauses of the second episode coordinated by *and* consist one turn, while the first two clauses, which are also coordinated by *and*, are counted as two separate turns. The analysis certainly calls for further clarification concerning this point.

Even with these shortcomings, Fludernik’s work is still interesting as an attempt to bring literary and linguistic studies on HP together, and it raises an interesting issue concerning the relationship between oral narratives of today and quasi-oral narratives in the Middle Ages. Referring to Ermarth (1981), Halliday (1987) and Wells (1960), Fludernik argues that present-day conversational narratives and literary narratives before the eighteenth century share a common structure defined as “episodic,” which is similar to the use of “paratactic language” in the spoken language (1991, 366). I believe that this has an important bearing on the role of tense-switching in forming a text, e.g., Middle English verse narratives.

Let us now turn to Fleischman’s approach to HP. As mentioned above, she accounts for its various meanings by applying the Hallidayan view of language (see n3).

First, temporal deictic and aspectual information are the ideational meanings realized by the present tense marker in English. Fleischman observes that the use of the present tense in narrative is marked and metaphorical, and concludes that “the function of tense forms in narrative is frequently not the basic tense function of locating events relative to the moment of speech (or an alternative reference point)” (Fleischman 1985, 852). Indeed, she claims that the ideational meaning expressed by HP is aspectual, rather than temporal deictic. She indeed points out that the long-standing definition of HP as bringing about vividness or dramatization is based not on the temporal deictic information, but rather “an effect deriving from the IPFV (imperfective) aspect of the PR (present) and from various meanings realized in the Expressive component” (Fleischman 1990, 78).

Second, Fleischman elucidates two kinds of interpersonal meaning realized by HP, namely, evaluation and point of view. To put them in different terms, they are the narrator’s subjectivity and “focalization,” respectively. With regard to evaluation, however, Fludernik criticizes Fleischman and says, “Although Fleischman emphasizes the subjective nature of the narrative present of action . . . which she links to Labov’s internal evaluation, the precise nature of this subjectivity remains somewhat vague” (Fludernik 1991, 369). I largely agree with Fludernik’s criticism concerning Fleischman’s definition of subjectivity, and attempt to elaborate it in the following section. For the moment, let us consider the second interpersonal meaning of focalization.

Fleischman maintains that subjectivity is considered to be closely linked to focalization. Taking the notion from Genette (1980) and Rimmon-Kenan (1983), Fleischman says that focalization is of three kinds:

External Focalization (focalization of the narrator): neutral and uninvolved

Internal Focalization (focalization of the character): colored and involved

“Degree-Zero” Focalization (the persona of the historian): relatively objective

(1990, 220)
Fleischman maintains that of the three, subjectivity plays a crucial role in internal focalization. She states that “evaluative language provides a window onto focalization” (1990, 260). This argument inevitably emphasizes that focalization or psychological point of view is realized through a different system of options from systems of subjectivity. In language of fiction, focalization is realized most prominently through modality in language by means of, e.g., modal auxiliaries, evaluative adverbs and adjectives. The issue has been quite fully elucidated by Fowler’s seminal work (1986, 127-46), which has subsequently been elaborated by Simpson (1991; 1993) and Ehrlich (1987; 1990). As far as HP is concerned, it contributes to a total effect of focalization through its modality coloring, and its cognitive metaphorical meaning of providing an inner perspective.

The third set of meanings brought about by tense-switching are textual ones. Fleischman argues that there are basically three major meanings realized, namely, grounding, boundary marking, and monitoring the tempo of information.

Foreground-background contrasts and cohesion are related to the textual meaning of grounding. In a given language, a foreground-background contrast is achieved by various contrasts to the norms of that particular language. What is most notable about Fleischman’s work is that she relates the foreground-background contrast created by tense to cohesion in orality-dominant composition. She argues that before the elaborate development of explicit linguistic devices to indicate interclausal hypotactic relations, narrators used tense-switching to cover up those functions, especially in the epic genre of Medieval Romance. More specifically, the narrator uses tense-switching to establish the kind of cohesion normally created by “coordinating and subordinating conjunctions” (Fleischman 1990, 196). In this way, tense-switching is regarded as a “cohesive” device that contributes to creating the “texture” of a text. Fleischman illustrates the above argument in the examples from Chanson de Roland. She maintains that switches indicate segmentation points of a “macro event” in two ways. First, switching from the narrative present to the composed past marks a shift from the inception point to its completion. Second, switching in the reverse direction denotes a circular anaphoric nexus, i.e., a return to the narration of an event temporally interrupted by narrating in, for instance, the composed past. Fleischman adds that it is switches from HP to PR that contribute further to textual formation of narratives, i.e., “cohesion” (1990, 200). Switching in this direction serves to partition a narrative into further units. Moreover, partitions are likely to coincide with changes of subjects and/or of discourse topics, a factor which is naturally related to both the “participant-tracking” and the setting-marking effects, when they co-occur. In addition, “span-marking” may be further marked with uses of temporal adjuncts like “all of a sudden” in Present-Day English oral narratives.

The monitoring of the tempo of information is the last textual information discussed by Fleischman. It relates to the way in which information is “blocked” or distributed throughout a text. What underlies this control of information in narrative is a question as to how much of the content of a discourse the narrator thinks the listener can take in at one time (Fleischman 1990, 205). Fleischman tackles the problem from two perspectives, namely, information-distribution patterns across clauses and clause-linkage patterns, and distribution patterns of new information in relation to tense-switching.
For the first aspect of information-blocking, Fleischman finds that the information distribution patterns in examples like the following reflect the audience aural reception capability (1990, 207).

Tant chevalchereit que en Saraguce sunt.
(They rode so far long that they are in Saragossa.)
(*Chanson de Roland* 2689; Fleischman 1990, 207)

... si s’en va tant que ele vint au mur del castel.
(... [she] goes so far long that she reached the castle.)
(*Aucassin et Nicolette* 16:6-7; Fleischman 1990, 207)

Fleischman finds Foley and Van Valin’s (1984) typology of three clause-linkage patterns (coordination, co-subordination and subordination) useful in explaining the issue. She considers that the above two examples are in co-subordination nexus. This nexus, she maintains, is closely linked up with the pragmatic and prosodic requirements of oral narration (1990, 207). This is because, with such construction, the narrator reduces the density of new information by splitting what could be expressed in a clause into two separate clauses. With regard to reduction of information density, it is also the case with other repetitive expressions at various levels in orally performed narratives. However, as to the role of tense-switching in the above two examples, Fleischman only points out differences in focus. That is, the arrival of the journey is in the foreground in the first example, while in the second, the process of movement or traveling is foregrounded. Thus, the exact role tense plays in distributing new/given information remains not fully explained.

The second aspect is problematic as well. Fleischman chooses texts from the *romancerbo*, the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spanish ballad tradition. The argument is disappointingly unconvincing in two ways. First, the examples by which she attempts to illustrate her point could be better explained by applying the well-known correlation between transitivity and grounding (Hopper and Thompson 1980; Ikegami 1990). Second, the argument lacks a clear definition of new information, and potentially illuminating examples from *romancerbo* (Fleischman 1990, 209) do not serve as representative instances of the hypothesized relationship between new information distribution patterns and tense-switching.

Finally, Fleischman argues that the narrator manipulates the speed of narration by means of tense-switching in two ways. On the one hand, a series of “diegetic” action present verbs (the present tense with past time reference) speed up “the pace of narration,” and on the other, “visualizing” verbs in HP slow it down (Fleischman 1990, 210-12). Although it is true that tense-switching partly serves a role of pacing of a given narrative, limitations of space do not permit us to deal with the issue in the present paper.

Although Fleischman has no doubt made a major contribution to our understanding of HP, her findings are largely based upon her analysis of Medieval Romance languages. The following section attempts to shift our attention to HP in Middle English verse narratives.
III. HP as a linguistic marker realizing modality (interpersonal meaning) and foregrounding (textual meaning)

Concerning HP in Middle English verse narratives, Burnley provides a very succinct account of two extreme views:

Two extreme positions would be: on the one hand, that selection of the present is merely a metrical convenience with no other significance; or that, on the other hand, by contrast, the selection of the present tense is a stylistic manoeuvre to give immediacy and vividness to the narrative. (1989, 52)

The two representative studies are Visser (1966, 705-26) and Benson (1961, 65-77). Visser’s argument is thorough and convincing. However, more recent studies have revealed that HP and other aspectual-alternations, e.g., the use of gan with infinitive in Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde, function as a discourse marker, not just for the sake of better versification (Brinton 1990; see also Burnley 1989 for his discussion of gan in The Canterbury Tales).

Burnley argues that there are distinctions to be made between cases in which HP is used purely as metrical convenience and those in which it is used as a stylistic device (1989, 54-55). He examines several instances in which stylistic effects of HP are quite obvious. In his examination of some of the instances of HP in KnT, he observes the following meanings or effects.13

1. initiation of a new topic (A 965)
2. anticipation for the next topic (A 974)
3. amplification upon a basic narrative, e.g., the splendor of Theseus (A 976-77), emotion, ceremony and violent action
4. creation of a vivid picture with the help of other deictic elements (A 981-82)
5. actualization of events supported by now (A 1871; 2600; 2758)
6. immediacy, i.e., controlling of the perspective of the audience (A 1451-56)

(Burnley 1989, 51-58)

If we apply the tri-functional view of language to the above six meanings or effects of HP, they can be very roughly grouped into two categories: 3, 4, 5 and 6 as interpersonal, and 1 and 2 as textual.

Following Fleischman and Burnley, I would like to propose that HP is used to realize the following meanings.

First, the ideational meanings of the present tense marker, i.e., temporal deictic (the speaker’s now) and aspectual meanings (imperfective aspect of the process) are not realized prominently in the narrative genre. As we have seen, the temporal deictic information is redundant or unnecessary in the narrative context. Concerning this point, Fleischman points out that “the temporal distance ... is systematically extended ... to convey distance along axes located not only within grammar” (1989, 2). The aspectual meaning is also used metaphorically in the narrative context.

Second, HP is used to realize interpersonal meanings. They can be grouped into two categories, although the two are not completely independent, but are complementary to one another. Of the two, the central interpersonal meaning is modality.
INTERPERSONAL 1: intensifying unusuality and unexpectedness of a certain event, i.e., most tellable/reportable portion(s) of a narrative.

The above meaning is realizable through metaphorically extended meaning of the present tense marker, i.e., from the temporal axis to the cognitive one (actuality/reality vs. non-actuality/non-reality). Fleischman observes that in the context of narrative, the past tense functions as indicating cognitive proximity, while the present serves to realize cognitive distance (1989, 2). The modal meaning of HP derives from this metaphorical use of the present tense. Therefore, "unusuality" is added to the basic propositional meaning of a given clause (Halliday 1985, 334-37).

In fact, the above claim is in line with Martin's argument concerning the interpersonal meanings consistent in the narrative genre (1992, 564-69). According to Martin, unusuality is at work both at the levels of genre and language. In light of his discussion, I argue that HP contributes to the interpersonal meaning of a text in such a way that it allows the reader to recognize a certain portion of a narrative told in HP as having significance, to a varying extent, with regard to its tellability. The second interpersonal meaning may be summarized as:

INTERPERSONAL 2: expressing internally focalized perspective of the narrator to a varying extent, i.e., involvement of the narrator in what is being told, which naturally reports things as colored, not neutral (Fleischman 1990, 220; Fludernik 1991, 374). Most typically, protagonists' inner states are reported in HP.

Focalization is a more abstract metaphor than modality. Such meaning or effect is made possible partly by aspectual information. That is, the present tense marker entails imperfective meaning, which makes "explicit reference to the internal temporal structure of a situation" (Comrie 1976, 24). In this definition of aspect, we notice that the notion of point of view has crept in, i.e., seeing from within. In the same fashion, Fleischman expands the definition and claims that "imperfective verbs view situations analytically from the inside" (1990, 19). The metaphorical meaning of imperfective aspectual meaning and modality of the present tense marker together produce an effect of internal focalization. As we will see in the following section, protagonists' inner states (e.g., feelings) are often expressed in HP. It should be noted, however, that inner focalization or perspective is more explicitly expressed by modal adjuncts, modal auxiliaries and verba sentiendi (words denoting thoughts, feelings and perceptions) (Fowler 1986; Simpson 1991). Therefore, HP is a syntactically minor and semantically subtle device to express focalization in narrative.

Third, HP is used to realize textual meanings:

TEXTUAL 1: providing foreground-background contrasts. PR is the norm or the unmarked tense in narrative (Fleischman 1990, 56). Thus, breaking the norm creates a contrast, i.e., the foreground against the background.

TEXTUAL 2: (i) creating cohesive ties between a set of related clauses in a narrative; when HP is suspended for a number of clauses, it creates an effect of setting off a part of a narrative from the rest by creating a foregrounded "scene," and (ii) functioning as a
protagonist-alternation marker, which is similar to what is called "participant tracking" by narratologists (Fleischman 1990, 200-1).

Cohesion is made possible by foreground-background contrasts between HP and PR. In addition, (ii) is apparently a variation of (i), and can be subsumed into (i). 17

In the following section, we will examine representative examples of HP that illustrate my discussion thus far.

IV. HP in Middle English verse narratives 18

The following excerpt depicts one of a few examples of HP in Havelok, an early fourteenth century romance. In this example, the narrator uses HP to realize both unusualness and foregrounding:

Al so he seten and sholde soupe,
So comes a ladde in a soupe,
And with him sixt other stronge,
With swerdes drawen and kniues longe,
Jilkan [n] hunde a ful god gleue,
And sayde "Unde, Bernard the greuye!"

(Havelok 1767-72)

INTERPERSONAL: Intensifying unexpectedness of an arrival of a group of thieves.
TEXTUAL: Foregrounding of the clause in HP indicates the beginning of a fighting scene that follows.

Immediately preceding the above text, the narrator of the story describes a warm and welcoming scene of the supper prepared for Havelok and his wife, Goldeboru, by Bernard Brun who is the headman of a town in Denmark. The peaceful atmosphere is suddenly interrupted by a group of thieves as described. The beginning of the new event is introduced by a dependent clause beginning with Al so, whose first letter is written in a larger initial in blue with red decoration in and around it. Then, the content of the actual new event is reported in the primary clause that begins with a temporal conjunction so. Furthermore, the sudden attack by the thieves is marked with a switch into HP.

HP in the above example resembles a typical instance of HP in Present-Day English oral narratives. There is, however, a difference as well. That is, tense-switching within the dependent-head construction as in the above example is not unusual in Middle English verse narratives, while in Present-Day English it is unusual. Wolfson observes that a similar construction (i.e., when-clause in PR + head clause in HP) in Present-Day American English narratives, is rare in her data (less than 10%) (1979, 174). She further notes that it is more common for a change of events to be introduced by HP along with a temporal adjunct. 19 All of a sudden is especially often used with tense-switching (Wolfson 1979, 174). 20 A typical example is as follows:
We just pulled into this lot.
It was just in this lot.
And all of a sudden the buzzer sounds.
And all these guys hh come hh out.

(Schiffrin 1981, 47)

INTERPERSONAL: Unexpectedness of the sounding of the buzzer.
TEXTUAL: Foregrounding of the two clauses in HP, indicating the beginning of a strange
and rather frightening experience.

Wolfson claims that the effect of such co-occurrence of the temporal adjunct and tense-
switching is to signal the beginning of a new event. In fact, such an effect is achieved
through modality and the marked thematic structure, which brings about a total effect of
foregrounding, i.e., “consistency of foregrounding” (Hasan 1989, 95). This is a good way
to introduce a sudden turn of events in oral narratives in Present-Day English. There are
similar constructions found in Middle English verse narratives, although a question
remains as to whether one should regard similar constructions in Middle English verse
narratives as marked to the same extent. The following is such an instance:21

He wolde doon so ferdithly his myght
Upon the tirant Creon hem to wike
That al the peole of Grece shold ele speke
How Creon was of Theseus yserved
As he that hadde his deeth ful wel deserved.
And right anoon, withouten moore abood,
His baner he desplayeth, and forth rood
To Thebes-ward, and al his hoost biside.

(A 960-967)22

INTERPERSONAL: An unexpectedly quick military action by Theseus by a request from
the women whose husbands had been killed by Creon.
TEXTUAL: Foregrounding of a clause told in HP, indicating the beginning of a fighting
scene that follows.

In this example, the temporal adjunct And right anoon, withouten moore abood is used to
intensify the foregrounding of the beginning of Theseus’s fighting with Creon in Thebes,
and tense-switching is employed to reinforce the introduction of a new event.

The next example from KnT is taken from a fighting scene between the two
protagonists, Arcite and Palamon. This part marks the “peak” of the narrative, i.e., the most
tellable or in other words, most unusual. Applying Martin’s explanation concerning the
generic structure of narrative in terms of interpersonal meanings, the following excerpt
represents an interpersonally significant part in telling of the struggle to turn adversity into
a happier and restored equilibrium (1992, 568). Besides, in Medieval romances, a
description of a fight like this one holds a significant place. Since unusuality is at its peak
in the entire story, the fight scene is mostly told in HP.
Thou were the gates shut, and cried was loude:
“Do now youre devoir, yonge knyghtes proude!”
The heraude lefte her prikyng up and doun;
Now ryngen trompes loude and clarion:

He feeleth thurgh the herte-spoon the prikke.
Up sprynge the speres twenty foot on highte;
Out goon the swerdes as the silver brighte;
The helmes they tothemen and toshrede;
Out brest the blood, with sterne stremes rede;
With myghty maces the bones they tobreste,
He thurgh the thikkeste of the throng gan threste;
Ther stomblen stedes stronge, and doun gooth al,
He rolleth under foot as dooth a bal;
He fayneth on his feet with his troonchoun,
And he hym hurtleth with his hors adoun;

Out renneth blood on bothe hir sydes rede.
Som tyme an ende ther is of every dede.
For er the sonne unto the reste wente,
The stronge kyng Emetheus gan hente
This Palamon, as he fought with Arcite,
And made his swerd depe in his flesh to byte;

(A 2597-2600; 2606-16; 2635-40)

INTERPERSONAL: Unusuality at the PEAK in the entire narrative
TEXTUAL: All of the fighting is told as a foregrounded scene by the use of consecutive use of HP throughout.

In this part of the story, the beginning of a new scene is marked with HP with a temporal adjunct as in the two Middle English examples examined thus far. Yet, unlike the previous examples, HP is used for a suspended sequence. As a result, the whole fighting scene is set off as the foreground. It should be noted here in passing that this portion of KnIT shows fewer variations in tense among eleven manuscripts examined. It may be argued that the above observation about “peak” of modality and foregrounding is supported, in that the scribes chose HP rather than PR, given an option of telling the entire potion in PR.

The examples thus far have demonstrated most readily recognizable uses of HP for modern readers who no longer share the fourteenth-century norms of language use. There are in fact instances of tense-switching in which the narrator’s motivation for them is not as evident as the examples above, as far as tellability is concerned. Such instances include those of focalization.

Focalized perspective of the narrator is, in other words, the narrator’s deep involvement in the story. Yet, it is not at all clear what involvement exactly means. Involvement can be construed as narrating from one protagonist’s perspective (Iwasaki 1993). It has been indicated above that such meaning derives metaphorically from the imperfective aspect of
the present tense as well as the aspectual information carried by the verb and/or by the clause.

Here is such an example, in which the narrator tells of the moment of Arcite's death from Emily's perspective.

    And with that word his speche faile gan,
    For from his feet up to his brest was come
    The coold of deeth, that hadde hym overcome,
    And yet moreover, for in his armes two
    The vital strength is lost and al ago.

(A 2798-2802)

INTERPERSONAL: Reporting from Emily's perspective, i.e., internal focalization

TEXTUAL: Foregrounding of Arcite's death

Note that Arcite, whose death is now being reported, is held by Emily. Therefore, with the use of HP in line 2801, the first two lines of the above example allow an interpretation that it is Emily who feels that Arcite's strength in his arms is lost and that all is over. Instead of such a subtle use of HP realizing internal focalization, we normally find that protagonists' inner feelings are expressed by *verba sentiendi*, and highlighted by HP:

    But *taketh* his leve, and homward he him spedde.
    Lat hym be war! His nekke *lieth* to wedde.
    How greet a sorwe *suffreth* now Arcite!
    The deeth he *feeleth* thurgh his herte smye;
    He *wepe*th, *wayleth*, *crieth* pitously;
    To sleen hymself he *waiteth* privelly.

    ..............................................
    Whan that he wiste Arcite was agon,
    Swich sorwe he *make*th that the grete tour
    *Rosenmeth* of his youlyng and clamour.

(A 1217-22; 1276-78)

INTERPERSONAL: Unusualness frustrates the two protagonists in different ways. HP is used in describing each protagonist's inner state.

TEXTUAL: Foregrounding a turn of events, and marking the beginning of a new scene in the first part about Arcite and the latter part about Palamon.

We are told in this part of the story that Arcite was released from the prison to return to Thebes with help from a mutual friend of Arcite and Theseus. The release, however, was possible under one strict condition: Arcite would never return to Athens. He, therefore, was in much agony, assuming never to see Emily again, while having learned that Arcite had been released, Palamon was also feeling a great sorrow in prison.

Obviously, the above example does not represent a narrative told entirely from the protagonists' inner perspectives. What we see is their world-views "framed by the authorial ideology" (Fowler 1986, 138).
What motivates the narrator to use HP in the following excerpt could be rather puzzling, if we only take the interpersonal aspects of HP discussed above into account.

This Palamon answere, “I graunte it thee.”
And thus they been departed til amorwe,
When ech of hem had leyd his feith to borwe.
O Cupide, out of alle charitee!
O regne, that wolt no felawe have with thee!
Ful sooth is seyd that love ne lordship
Wol noght, his thankses, have no felaweshipe.
Wel fynden that Arcite and Palamoun.
Arcite is riden anon unto the toon,
And on the morwe, er it were dayes light,
Ful privelie two harneyes hath he dight,
Bothe suffisant and mete to darreyne
The bataille in the feeld bitwix hem twayne.
And on his hors, alone as he was born,
He carieth al the harneyes hym biferm.
And in the grove, at tyme and place yset,
This Arcite and this Palamon ben met.
To chaungyn gan the colour in hir face;
Right as the hunters in the regne of Trace,
That stondeth at the gappe with a spere,

(A 1620-39)

TEXTUAL: Demarcating a portion of the story from the rest by cohesion of tense.

As long as tellability or unusualness is concerned, the scene told in HP is neither significant nor unusual when compared to the surrounding parts of it. This is a scene that describes how Arcite prepares for the fight on the following day. What is more worth telling, of course, is the following fighting scene between Arcite and Palamon. It is possible to speculate that one textual meaning is most prominently realized by tense-switching, i.e., marking a division of events. A similar example in Present-Day English is provided by Wolfson:

Oh, yes, we decided to go to this pizza place for lunch.
So we sailed.
We left at eleven in the morning
And we got there at three, okay?
Four miles, it was against the wind all the way.
We get up to the place,
we have our lunch,
we get back in the boat,
and said to Bud, “I think the wind died.”
The wind died, it took us hours to get back.
And we were shipping water because we had a hole in the boat.
So by the time we got back, we had paddled three quarters of the way back.
No wind.
Absolutely dead.
The sail was absolutely hanging there,
and I was paddling.
And Bud finally took the daggerboard out
and using it as a paddle.

(Wolfson 1981, 228)

TEXTUAL: Demarcating a portion of the story from the rest by cohesion of tense.
Very much like the previous excerpt from KnT, HP is used not so much for expressing interpersonal meanings, but rather it is used for cohesion. That is, tense-switching contributes to the organization of a text, and furthermore expresses the connectedness of a set of clauses. Wolfson argues that the part of the story told in HP is of no dramatic importance in the entire story (1981, 228). This is why Wolfson does not recognize significant meaning in HP per se, but claims that it is switching between PR and HP that creates the effect. Her argument, however, fails to recognize multiple and simultaneous meanings of HP in narrative other than one textual meaning, i.e., cohesion.

There are, of course, other ways to realize cohesive relationships. The following example illustrates another way to mark a cohesive tie by using tense-switching from HP to PR and back into HP.

That soon after the mydnyght Palamoun
By helpynge of a frend, brak his prisoun
And *fleeeth* the citie faste as he may go.
For he hadde yeve his gayler dryrike so
Of a clarre mead of a certeyn wyn,
With nercotikes and opie of Thebes fyne,
That al that nyght, thogh that men wolde him shake,
The gayler sleepe; he myghte not awake.
And thus he *fleeeth* as faste as evere he may.

(A 1467-75)

TEXTUAL: Marking a cohesive tie across an inserted, backgrounded scene. HP in line 1475 indicates that the narrator resumes the story at the point where s/he has left, making an anaphoric reference to line 1469.

Compare the above with Coghill’s translation in Modern English:

Soon after the midnight, ere the sun had risen,
Helped by a friend, Palamon broke from prison
And fled the town as fast as he could go.
A drink had proved his jailer’s overthrow,
A kind of honeyed claret he had fixed
With Theban opium and narcotics mixed.
The jailer slept all night; had he been shaken
He would have been impossible to waken.
So off runs Palamon as best he may.  

(Coghill 1977, 58-59)

Coghill’s translation is unique in that it attempts to retain some of the features of Middle English verse narratives. However, it is interesting to note the differences with regard to tense. In the Modern English translation, a cohesive tie between the two clauses in question is realized by the repetition of the proper noun and the substitution device So. In the original, on the other hand, cohesion is partially realized by the use of HP in the two clauses along with other cohesive features.

Protagonist alternation is another textual meaning that is realized by HP in contrast to PR.

Ful litel woote Arcite of his felawe,
That was so ny to herknen al his sawe,
For in the busshe he sitteth now ful stille.

(A 1525-27)

TEXTUAL: Tense-switching from PR to HP creates a contrast between the two protagonists, Arcite and Palamon. As a result, it indicates protagonist alternation.

In the above example, it is easily recoverable from the previous two lines and other preceding parts of the story, that it is Palamon who sits in the bush, not Arcite. Switching from PR to HP in lines 1526 to 1527, however, reinforces the shift from Arcite to Palamon by telling what Palamon does in HP for the purpose of creating a contrast with Arcite. Here are two more examples of this kind:

He priketh endelong the large place
Lokyng upward upon this Emelye;
And she agayn him caste a frendlich ye

(A 2678-80)

TEXTUAL: Tense-switching from HP to PR creates a contrast between the two protagonists, Arcite and Emily.

Shrighte Emelye, and howlith Palamon,

(A 2817)

TEXTUAL: Tense-switching from HP to PR creates a contrast between the two protagonists, Emily and Palamon.

The stylistic effect of tense-switching in the above two examples is undoubtedly a subtle one. Indeed, unlike the one in line 1527, the protagonist alternation is marked more explicitly by the pronominal references and the proper noun in the former example, and by using the proper nouns in the latter one. In fact, scribes could have chosen not to alter tenses, which leads us into the issue of optionality of tense-switching in narrative.

Take, for instance, three of the manuscripts examined, namely, Ellesmere (EL), Cambridge Gg.4.27 (GG) and Paris Anglais 39 (PS). It has been claimed that EL and GG
shared the same exemplar (Manly and Rickert 1940, 150), and that the scribe of PS perhaps used GG (Manly and Rickert 1940, 401). The three manuscripts display an interesting point with regard to the discussion above. That is, as to lines 1525–27, all the three manuscripts agree with the use of tense. With regard to lines 2678–80 and 2817, however, PS does not conform to GG, having *prikit* and *Shryeth* (possibly 3 pr. sg.) instead. The scribe of PS, nevertheless, has a good reason to have written *Shryeth*, for this line sets off by a large initial indicating the beginning of a new section of the story. In such a case, as we have seen, the scribe has an option of highlighting it by HP.

The optionality of HP has been briefly touched upon in conjunction with textual meanings, but it is also the case with interpersonal meanings. For instance, *desplayeth* in line 966 appears in the present tense in three of the manuscripts. And in the rest of them, it is in the past tense form, including PS.

With regard to HP in Present-Day English, Wolfson regards its optionality as “an essential characteristic” and as “a property common to all discourse markers” (1979, 181). She finds that the narrator’s choice of HP is “open to influence from the speech situation” (1979, 181). As to HP in Middle English verse narratives, a full list of factors that affect the choice of HP will never be available. Nevertheless, it may be possible to investigate more thoroughly where it becomes optional for the narrator to use HP in narrative.

V. Conclusion

In the present paper, I have proposed that the narrator uses the ideational lexicogrammatical resources of the present tense to realize metaphorical meanings in Middle English verse narratives. The present study has followed up on Fleischman’s studies, and presented further elaboration and specification by examining Middle English data. With regard to interpersonal meanings, I have elaborated Fleischman’s rather ambiguous definition of “subjectivity” realized by HP, and argued that subjectivity can be more specifically defined as intensifying unusuality. Moreover, I have elucidated the ways in which this interpersonal meaning and the imperfective aspect open up a window to the other interpersonal meaning, i.e., internal focalization. As to textual meanings, foregrounding is the essential meaning realized by HP in contrast to PR. This contrast is made, because the use of present tense in narrative is norm-breaking and it thus sets portions of a narrative in the foreground against the background, denoting boundaries in text. The narrator uses such contrasts to form a cohesive text. I have pointed out the two ways, in which the tense-contrast functions to create cohesive ties in verse narratives. I hope that the above argument has contributed to solving a puzzling question as to what motivates the narrator to use the present tense marker in Middle English verse narratives.

Notes

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paper, and Derek Britton for having generously shared his expertise on possible interpretations of Shreikh in PS. Needless to say, any inadequacies are my own.

1 Visser gives a full list of verse narratives from the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, in which the present tense is employed to refer to past events (1966, 707). Visser does not regard such uses of the present tense as HP, and calls them “the substitutive present” (1966, 724).

2 To be precise, Fleischman distinguishes the use of the present tense with reference to the past, which she names “diegetic present” as a cover term, in two different ways. She regards the present tense in modern writings of short fictions or novels as a very cultivated one, and calls it HP, while the use of the tense in orally performed narratives is more in alternation with PR and is called the narrative present (1990, 376n22). In addition to the distinction, she also points out that the term “historical present” does not define the kind of function it serves in narrative, for it rather exclusively serves as a narrative device rather than grammaticalization of the location in time (1990, 286).

3 Halliday and Hasan define the three functions of language succinctly as follows:

   Ideational: It “is concerned with the expression of “content,” with the function that language has of being ABOUT something” (1976, 26).

   Interpersonal: It “is concerned with the social, expressive and conative functions of language, with expressing the speech’s “angle”: his attitudes and judgements, his encoding of the role relationships in the situation, and his motive in saying anything at all” (1976, 26-27).

   Textual: It “is the text-forming component in the linguistic system. This comprises the resources that language has for creating text ... ; for being operationally relevant, and cohering within itself ... “ (1976, 27).

4 It must be noted that tense has been seen as a metaphor of aspect. Traugott argues that aspect gives rise to tense (1982, 253): completive to past and non-completive/durative to present. She maintains that this is in line with her argument concerning the general direction of grammaticalization: propositional > textual > expressive. She writes, “insofar as tense is deictic to the speaker, it is more personal than aspect” (1982, 253).

5 Regarding the choice and use of tense, Halliday and Hasan claim that two principles are in operation:

   A. “that there is a choice of past, present and future.”
   B. “that this choice may be made repeatedly (within limits), each new choice taking the previous one as its point of departure.” (1976, 186)

It is normally the case, then, that unless motivated to realize certain meaning(s), the speaker or the writer continues to choose the same tense.

6 Martin finds Labov’s definition of evaluation problematic, and says:

   The non-discrete realisation of Evaluation makes locating the major focus of the Evaluation difficult, which in turn calls into question the use of a localised Evaluation to define the Resolution. The difficulty here lies in Labov’s equation of interpersonal meaning (language) with Evaluation (genre) and his failure to
distinguish clearly between particulate and prosodic perspectives on generic structure. (1992, 556)

7 It is through “subjective” comments of the narrator that the audience recognizes the tellability of a narrative. And it is “subjectivity” that plays a central role in narrative both in terms of evaluative language used in narrative, including HP, and of shaping the generic structure of narrative. Subjectivity is mapped onto language by means of realization of interpersonal meaning. In other words, subjectivity is regarded as the point of departure in telling a narrative. Martin presents specific ways in which interpersonal meaning of narrative constructs the generic structure of narrative. He claims:

In narrative, abnormality frustrates the inclinations of key protagonists, who then struggle to turn adversity into a happier and restored equilibrium; narratives thus foreground modulations of inclination and transformations of negative to positive affect. (1992, 568)

8 In addition to her discussion of evaluative meaning of HP in narrative, Schiffrin presents a quantitative analysis of HP as well. Her findings show that HP mostly occurs in Complicating Action parts.

9 The notion of “focalization” briefly summarized here and Iwasaki’s notion of “perspective” are closely related. Iwasaki claims that there are three types of perspective available to represent experiences of various kinds:

A. S-perspective (SELF-perspective) to report the inner states of the speaker himself/herself.
B. O-perspective to report “another sentient being’s experience.”
C. Zero-perspective to report no sentient being’s experience.
(1993, 17-30)

He further argues that these three types of “perspective” are related to information accessibility, transitivity (i.e., Hopper and Thompson’s version of transitivity). The speaker’s decision as to which of the three is to be adopted is one determining factor in what tense/aspect forms are used in narratives.

10 Fleischman maintains that normally a setting-based span (an equivalent notion of Wolfson’s “event”) starts off with an orientation section of one or more clauses in PR, continues on to narrative events reported in either HP or PR for foreground or background, respectively, and is wrapped up with a switch from HP to PR that indicates the onset of a new span (1990, 201).

11 Clauses in co-subordination linkage fall in between those of coordination and subordination, and are characterized as being [+ dependent] and [- embedded], while coordination clauses are defined as [- dependent] and [- embedded] and subordination as carrying plus values for the two features.

12 Fleischman states that action tenses are normally employed to narrate events, and visualizing tenses to describe (1990, 35). However, there is correlation between aspect and situation types as she also points out. She claims that the action present tense normally co-occurs with telic achievements, and the visualizing present with accomplishment (telic) situations and two atelic situations (states and activities). As to the situation types mentioned above, Fleischman uses Vendler’s typology (1967). Achievements and accomplishments are
telic in that they contain natural endpoints, and states and activities make references to ongoing situations and are, therefore, telic (Fleischman 1990, 20-21).

Burnley observes one more meaning:

Removal of protagonists from the narrative context to give them an exemplary function (1989, 57)

The lines on which this observation is based are as follows:

Yow loveries axe I now this questicoun:
Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamon?
That oon may seen his lady day by day,
But in prison moor he dwelle alway.
That oother where hym list may ride or go,
But seen his lady shal he neuere mo.

(A 1347-52)

The type of narration in these lines differs to a large extent from straightforward narration in HP. Burnley argues that the narrator “removes Palamon and Arcite from their narrative context, and bestows upon them an exemplary function” (1989, 57). Nevertheless, it is not just the two protagonists that are removed from their narrative context, but the narrator himself has moved out of the story world and is now engaged in more direct interaction with the audience. For this reason, despite Burnley’s accurate description of the effect of the present tense, HP of this type is excluded from the scope of the present paper.

In his analysis of works of art from the systemic functional perspective, O’Toole locates the system of “perspective” (equivalent to what is called focalization in the present paper) into the interpersonal function of language. O’Toole claims that by a system of “Modal” function, “the artist structures a work or its details in such a way as to engage the attention of the viewer and draw them into the world of the work” (1994, 280). He further argues:

... [perspective] is a system of options in the Modal function, since it serves to create the illusion of an imaginary three-dimensional space of the world represented and draws the viewer into that world. (1994, 281)

For a criticism of Cornrie’s definition of imperfective and perfective, see, e.g., Dahl (1985, 74-79).

See Ehrlich (1987) for a discussion of past progressive, i.e., one of imperfective aspects, in certain cases, creating a similar kind of an effect.

A rather vague definition of “a set of related clauses in narrative” given here partially correspond to Brinton’s notion of episode boundaries marked by the following points of change:

A. a change in time;
B. a change in location;
C. a change in participants;
D. a change in action sequence, with an orientation toward a new central event, or the activation of a new schema;
E. a change in “possible world,” for example, from the real world to the fictional
world, from the real world to the dream world, or from the physical world to the world of thought;
F. a change from general to specific, or the reverse; and
G. a change in perspective or point of view.

(1993, 74)

Although Brinton's criteria for episode boundaries are set up for explaining discourse markers such as *tha* in Old English, they overlap with the ones proposed for possible tense-switching points in the present paper. The examples from *Havelok* and KnT are taken from Smithers (1987) and Benson (1987), respectively.

However, it is possible to regard *Al so*-clause in (1) as a clausal theme, behaving like a temporal adjunct.

Wolfson reports the 8 to 2 ratio of this temporal adjunct co-occurring with tense-switching in her transcribed data of Present-Day American narratives (1979, 174).

See Burnley for his argument about this instance of tense-switching (1989, 54-55).

With regard to variation among several manuscripts, HP is used both in EM and HG, GG is also in HP, while PS is in PR.

It is, however, possible to treat *Shryeth* as a scribal error, and to read it as *Shrycht* or *Shryekt*.

They are EL, HG and GG. Given that EL and HG have been argued to be written by the same hand (Doyle and Parkes 1978), and that EL and GG are also related in the sense GG is regarded as representing "the Ellesmere tradition without the EL-editing" (Manly and Rickert 1940, 76), it is reasonable to assume that it must have been in the present tense in Chaucer's original writing.

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