

The use and interpretation of 'by' time adverbials

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Many adverbials of time show restrictions with the aspectual classes of predicates they can combine with. Because of these restrictions, they have played an important role in exploring the properties of predicates such as stativity and telicity (see Dowty 1977 and Comrie 1985, *inter alia*). However, few studies have provided detailed analysis of the interpretive constraints and use conditions of these adverbials. In this study the use of English *by* temporal adjuncts (e.g. 'That should happen **by today**') in the *Wall Street Journal* subset of the Penn Treebank corpus (Marcus *et al.* 1995) is analyzed. Intuitions about the relation of *by* and the past perfect tense found in reference grammars (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:692, Huddleston *et al.*, 2002:655) and ESL teaching materials (Fuchs and Bonner 2006: 32-40, Van Zante *et al.* 2000: 65) fail to conform with how these phrases are actually used in the corpus. *By* phrases found in the data rarely occur with main clauses coded by the perfect tenses and in many cases cannot be construed as denoting 'time deadlines'. This paper presents a unified analysis of *by* temporal adjuncts functioning as state selectors which presuppose a pragmatic frame. *By* temporal adjuncts interact with aspect of the clauses they modify in order to differentiate between two possible readings. In 'Shearson Lehman Hutton Inc. **by yesterday afternoon** had already written new TV ads', the result of an eventive predication is understood to hold at the time indicated in the *by* phrase. However, in sentences with stative predications in the main clause, the state itself rather than the result of an event is understood to hold as with 'It was **by then** next to his desk.' *By* temporal adjuncts also presuppose a contextually evoked frame of reference. The varying acceptability of 'The sun had risen **by 5:30/ ?March/ *2004**' compared with 'The stock had risen **by 5:30/March/2004**' illustrates the contextually sensitive interpretations of *by* phrases. This suggests *by* temporal adjuncts should be included as a member of the set of contextual operators as described in Kay (1997:159).

References

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