

Denison, David. 1992. The information present: Present tense for communication in the past. *History of Englishes: New methods and interpretations in historical linguistics*, ed. Matti Rissanen, Ossi Ihalainen, Terttu Nevalainen & Irma Taavitsainen, 262-86. (*Topics in English Linguistics* 10.) Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

David Denison,
Department of English Language & Literature, [in 1991; now [Linguistics and English Language](#)]
University of Manchester,
Manchester M13 9PL,
England.

The Information Present:
Present Tense for
Communication in the Past

0. Foreword¹

In this paper I will describe a curiosity of Present-day English and offer a historical explanation for its ecology, suggesting that an unusual active ~ passive relationship has been preserved. My explanation also involves an interplay between syntax and pragmatics which has important theoretical implications for modularity in linguistics. In §1 there are details of the facts to be explained, in §2 I advance an explanation, in §3 there is some further material, and in §4 I sketch an analysis of the present-day situation.

1. The problem

1.1. Informant-subject

A well-known mismatch between tense and time is shown in the first verb of (1-3):

(1) *Jim tells me that the forecast is bad.*

- (2) *Jim informs me that the forecast is bad.*
- (3) *Jim gives me to understand that the forecast is bad.*

The point is that present tense for the higher verb of sentences like (1-3) is idiomatic even when Jim is not present at the time of utterance. (The tense of the embedded clause is irrelevant, since that may encode any appropriate time or mood at all.)

All decent grammars of English mention this quirky use of present tense despite the literal pastness of the event,² sometimes explaining it in essence as due to present result and/or current relevance. Of course that is a typical recipe for the use of the present *perfect*, and none of the grammars can fully explain why here, almost uniquely, simple present will do.³ Most synonyms of TELL work the same, as for example

ACKNOWLEDGE, ADMIT, ADVISE, AFFIRM, ALLEGE, ?APPRISE, BOAST, CLAIM, CONFESS, DECLARE, DENY, GIVE *out*, INFORM, INDICATE, INSTRUCT, MAINTAIN, MENTION, ?OBSERVE, POINT *out*, PRETEND, PROFESS, PROMISE, ?RELATE, REPORT, SAY, STATE, SUGGEST, WARN, WRITE, BRING/DRAW *to my attention/notice*, EXPRESS *surprise*, GIVE *me to understand*, WISH *me to know* – thus both everyday and formal, simple verbs and phrases.⁴ Let's call *Jim* the Informant,⁵ *me* the Experiencer, and the subclause the Information, and use the term Information Present for examples like (1-3).

Given that the tense usage in (1-3) is genuinely idiomatic with so many verbs, it is interesting that at least one verb doesn't work as expected:

- (4) *!Jim lets me know that the forecast is bad.*

After all, LET ... *know* is a very close synonym of INFORM, which does. And some of them only work if the Experiencer is absent:

- (5) *Jim says/suggests/indicates/?mentions⁶ that the forecast is bad.*
- (6) *?!Jim says/suggests/indicates/mentions to me that the forecast is bad.*

(Normal productive use of present perfect or simple past makes all of these examples grammatically acceptable, though simple present is usually the most likely choice when possible

at all.) As usual, the reader's agreement on relative rather than absolute acceptability is good enough for my purposes.

1.2. Experiencer-subject

Some of the grammars notice a variant of the Information Present with Experiencer as subject:

(7) *I hear (from Jim) that the forecast is bad.*

This too works with a number of synonyms and near-synonyms, e.g. FIND, GATHER, HEAR, LEARN, NOTICE, READ, SEE, HEAR *say/tell*,⁷ and fails with a few others:

(8) *!I come to hear/become aware that the forecast is bad.*

(9) *I find (!out) that the forecast is bad.*

The failures here are straightforward, I think, involving as they do verbs whose form is too strongly suggestive of punctual Aktionsart⁸ to be compatible with a state reading. Historically the same explanation will hold for the OE use of HIERAN 'hear' in the construction but apparent absence of GEFRIGNAN 'learn by inquiry', which according to Visser (1963-73: §791) and confirmed by Healey – Venezky (1980), always occurs in the present perfect or simple past with a first-person subject.

Failures (4) and (6) with the Informant-subject type can't be handled in the same way, though, and a different explanation is needed.

2. The beginnings of an explanation

2.1. The passive

Non-occurrence of the Information Present with Informant as subject seems to correlate with absence of a passive (in any tense):

(10 cf.1) *I'm told (by Jim) that the forecast is bad.*

(11 cf.4) **I'm let know (by Jim) that the forecast is bad.*⁹

(12 cf.6) **I'm suggested (to) (by Jim) that the forecast is bad.*

The correlation is not quite complete – WRITE may be one exception (but see note 6) – but it is very good indeed. Why should this be?

2.2. Underlying semantics or transitivity

One possible answer might be that both properties have a single underlying cause, say the semantic role of the Experiencer (and of the Informant?) or the transitivity of the clause. Now such things might well explain the absence of a passive: for example, a passive might presuppose sufficient transitivity in the active. Tense choice is less obviously related, however. The only possibly relevant link between transitivity and tense/aspect that I have noticed in Hopper – Thompson is the claim that the perfect is a low-transitivity choice (1980: 293), which might imply that the Information Present – if seen as failure to choose the perfect – goes with high transitivity.

My data don't support this line of reasoning. The scale of transitivity used by Hopper – Thompson (1980) does not appear to discriminate between (13) and (14) (or their non-perfect equivalents):

(13) *Jim has informed me that the forecast is bad.*

(14) *Jim has let me know that the forecast is bad.*

where only (13) has an equivalent in the Information Present. Worse, (15) with Experiencer actually scores higher than (16) without:

(15) *Jim has said to me that the forecast is bad.*

(16) *Jim has said that the forecast is bad.*

yet only (16) can be turned into the Information Present. If there is a single underlying cause for the apparently unrelated tense and voice properties, I have not been able to find it.

2.3. The hypothesis

I believe it is possible instead to treat the one property as a *consequence* of the other. The inference I draw from the facts in §2.1 above is that the prototypical form of the Information Present has the Experiencer as subject (normally 1 sg. *I*, of course), whether active like (7) or passive like (10).¹⁰ I hypothesize that the active forms (1-3) with Informant as subject are actually a secondary formation. That means that where there is no Experiencer-subject passive, as with the non-occurring (11-12), there can be no Informant-subject active with that verb.

2.4. A historical prediction

At least one prediction follows if this is correct: that sentences like (1-3) with simple present tense of the verb of telling will not be found before the advent of the indirect passive, which for unequivocal examples in written documents is the mid-fifteenth century. The earliest examples¹¹ I have so far of the (1) pattern all occur in texts containing some of the earliest examples of the indirect passive:

(17) (c1436) *Paston*¹² 425.15 *Wychyngham in his owen person in þe nyght next beforn þe seid Friday, as þe seid Tebald infourmeth me, come to þe same Tebaldes hows and desired hym to enseale acqytaunce ...*

(18) (not before 1453) *Paston* 47.9 *if Ser Thomas thynk that he shuld be a-lowyd mo, he shall be.*

if Sir Thomas thinks that he should be allowed more [money], he shall be

(19) (a1470) *Malory, Wks.*[1-vol. ed] 202.11 *For my sistir Lynet tellyth me that he can telle of what kynrede he is com of.*

for my sister Linnet tells me that he can tell (from)¹³ what family he has come from.

(20) (a1470) *Malory, Wks.* 428.4 *and whan he was gyvyn the gre be my lorde kynge Arthure. and when he(SUBJ) was given the prize-for-victory by my lord King Arthur*

(21) (1478) *Let.Cely* 19.45 *Wylliam Cely tellys me that he was vyth owr brother at hys departyng from Bottons ...*

(22) (1477/8) *Let.Cely*¹⁴ 16.17 *And as Y am enformed there was bytwene Thomas Blakham and my wyf causes vrgent, for the which Y haue had her in sharp examynacion.*

The status of (17) and (22) is complicated by the transition of INFORM at around this time from a verb with personal direct object (somewhat like TEACH) to a verb with personal *indirect* object (like TELL). The indirect passive of verbs taking a clear indirect object in the active was not common in the fifteenth century.¹⁵ So far, then, the prediction appears to hold.

The following fourteenth-century quotation is given by Visser in an unexpected place (1963-73: §1935):

(23) *he Apered helder [= rather] in fourme of fir ... þen in other element, as I am told.*

Although he claims that 'this early occurrence of "I am told" is noteworthy' (1963-73: 2114 n.1), when correctly quoted it is rather less noteworthy both for our present purposes and in the history of the indirect passive:

(24) a1500(?a1400) *SLChrist* 10430 *he Apered | helder in fourme of fir ... | þen in other element, As I am lered, | As clerkes techen sothe to say.*

he appeared rather in the-form of fire ... than in another element, as I am taught, as learned-men teach, truth to tell

ME LEREN 'teach' descends from an OE verb, LÆRAN, which could be construed with an accusative of person. Experiencer-subject passives occurred even in Old English, therefore – see Mitchell (1985: §835) – so that *I am lered* is not at all remarkable *qua* passive. As it happens, an Information Present would be entirely in line with my hypothesis and might even suggest a search for contemporary Informant-subject examples of LEREN. Unfortunately the meaning 'teach' is not one found in the Information Present nowadays, and the continuation of Visser's quotation confirms that the present tenses in (24) are probably not an Information Present but a different usage which I shall call 'citation of authority'. This requires brief discussion.

2.4.1. Citation of authority

We can discount numerous earlier Informant-subject examples – in Chaucer and as far back as Old English – of present tense verbs of telling which do not concern an actual, individual act of telling but rather the acquisition of information from a work of literary or theological authority:

(25) *ÆHom* 17.18 *Nu segð us se godspellere ... þæt ...*

now tells us the gospel-writer ... that ...

'Now the gospel-writer tells us ... that ...'

(26) c1430(c1386) Chaucer *LGW* 1139 *oure autour telleth us, That ...*

As Mitchell points out for Old English (1985: §623), such examples 'can equally well be taken as referring to a timeless present'. Furthermore, they belong typically to a rather more formal literary or didactic register.

2.5. Comparative data

What happens in related languages gives some support to the explanation I have offered for English. Jespersen suggests that the tense transfer seen in (7) and (10) 'probably occurs in all languages' ([1961], 4: 28). I have looked at some other European languages for which native informants have been accessible. It should be pointed out that my informants¹⁶ all found the judgements rather tricky and were hesitant in some or all of their decisions.

2.5.1. French and Spanish

Contra Jespersen, French and Spanish do not favour the (7) pattern with the Information Present and prefer the perfect, as shown in the (a) and (b) sentences below:

(27) a. *?!J'entends parler (par Jean) que ...*

I hear speak (by John) that ...

b. *J'ai entendu parler (par Jean) que ...*

I have heard speak (by John) that ...

(28) a. *!Sé (por Juan) que ...*

(I) know (by John) that ...

- b. *He sabido (por Juan) que*
(I) have known (by John) that ...

The Informant-subject type (1-3) is not the natural choice:

- (29) a. *?!Jean me dit que ...*
John me tells that ...
b. *Jean m'a dit que ...*
John me has told that ...
- (30) a. *?!Juan me dice que ...*
John me tells that ...
b. *Juan me ha dicho que ...*
John me has told that ...
c. *Juan me dijo que ...*
John me told(PAST) that ...

My French informants feel that the Information Present in (27a) and (29a) would be possible for Information received *very* recently indeed, a sort of "hot news" tense, otherwise not. The present tense occurs more freely with an indefinite pronoun subject:

- (31) *On me dit que ...*
one me tells that ...
'I am told that ...'

See §4.2.4 below.

2.5.2. German and Dutch

Coming etymologically closer to home, I have encountered a great deal of uncertainty on these matters from German and Dutch speakers. It seems that the equivalents of (7) in the Information Present are possible, if stilted, in German and Dutch, though even here the present perfect or past is much preferred (though Poutsma in passing actually likens English to Dutch (1926: 254)):

- (32) a. *?Ich hör' (vom Hans), daß ...*
I hear (from-the John) that ...
- b. *Ich hab' (vom Hans) gehört, daß ...*
I have (from-the John) heard that ...
- (33) a. *?!Ik hoor (van Johan) dat ...*
I hear (from John) that ...
- b. *Ik heb (van Johan) gehoord dat ...*
I have (from John) heard that ...
- c. *Ik hoorde (van Johan) dat ...*
I heard (from John) that ...

I am told by one Dutch speaker that (33a) with the PP *van Johan* would imply that Johan was probably still in the room, while (33a) without the PP would imply that the Experiencer didn't know where the Information came from. Another Dutch informant would be able to use (33a) with *van Johan* if Johan had only just left the room, while (33a) without the PP would be altogether unlikely. Wim van der Wurff, however, says that (33a) 'seems fine' (p.c. 24 Aug 1990).

Lack of an indirect passive means that those languages have no exact equivalent of (10), *I am told that ...*. Sentences in the impersonal passive or with an indefinite pronoun subject (G. *man*, Du. *men*) come close – not that the latter would be used to report information provided by one individual – and here too a perfect is more likely.

What of the Informant-subject type (1-3) with a specific, individual NP subject? In this case the Information Present does not occur in German or Dutch. These languages need to use a present perfect (or past):

- (34) a. *!Der Hans sagt mir, daß ...*
the John tells me that ...
- b. *Der Hans hat mir gesagt, daß ...*
the John has me told that ...
- (35) a. *!Johan vertelt mij dat ...*

John tells me that ...

- b. *Johan heeft mij verteld dat ...*

John has me told that ...

- c. *Johan vertelde mij dat ...*

John told(PAST) me that

Apparently German (34a) and (for at least two informants) Dutch (35a) would imply that John was standing next to the speaker at the time of utterance, which is not what I mean by the Information Present.

2.5.3. Danish

Now consider Danish. Like English it has an indirect passive, though perhaps not so readily used:

- (36) *Jeg blev givet en ny bil.*

I was [*lit.*: remained, became] given a new car.

- (37) *Jeg blev fortalt en historie.*

I was told a story.

- (38) *Jeg blev fortalt, at ...*

I was told that ...

Patterns (36-38) are all grammatical, though I have been given differing opinions on which of them sound most natural. And verbs of communication work much more like English than those of Dutch and German. As before I give examples both in (a) the Information Present and (b) the present perfect. Thus (39a) shows the Experiencer-subject pattern of (7), (40a) shows the crucial Informant-subject pattern of (1) with individual NP subject, and (41a) shows the Experiencer-subject pattern of (10) with indirect passive:

- (39) a. *Jeg hører (?fra Jan), at ...*

I hear (from John) that ...

- b. *Jeg har hørt (?fra Jan), at ...*
I have heard (from John) that ...
- (40) a. *Jan fortæller mig, at ...*
John tells me that ...
- b. *Jan har fortalt mig, at ...*
John has told me that ...
- (41) a. *?Jeg blir' fortalt (af Jan), at ...*
I am told (by John) that ...

In fact (41a), though grammatical, is less likely in practice than (41b) or (42):

- (41) b. *Jeg er blevet fortalt (af Jan), at ...*
I have been told (by John) that ...
- (42) *Jeg har hørt fortælle, at ...*
I have heard tell that ...

I am not in a position to make as full an analysis of the Danish facts¹⁷ as of the English, but in crucial cases they look remarkably similar.

2.5.4. Relevance to the passive hypothesis

A full cross-linguistic survey would have to take account not just of more languages but of the fact that English, unlike the other languages considered here, has a fully grammaticalised progressive which is the normal form for present time with dynamic verbs. The simple present can therefore be thought of as more readily available in English for other functions – such as the Information Present. It would also be safer to use native speakers with little or no knowledge of English, unlike my informants. Nevertheless, the fact that German (and Dutch?) *Informant*-subject sentences are much less acceptable than *Experiencer*-subject sentences fits in nicely with the derivation proposed in §2.3 for the English Information Present, as does the lack of such a contrast in both Danish and English.

2.6. Origins

More speculations can be added to the main hypothesis, for instance the idea that the Information Present originated with verbs like – or indeed *the* verbs – HIERAN 'hear' and SEON 'see'. Perhaps the present tense implied that there was a present *potential* for hearing or seeing some fact.¹⁸

Whatever the origins of the present tense usage, I am suggesting that it appeared first in the (active) *I hear that ...* construction and was extended to semantically and thematically similar passives like *I am told that ...* when the syntax made them available. From them it could spread to actives like *Jim tells me that ...*. The historical development is still reflected, I suggest, in the present-day distribution, and the Information Present is therefore another 'instance of (relatively) stable long term variation', to use Warner's phrase (1982: 228).

2.7. Informant-subject, no Experiencer

A different account is needed for Informant-subject patterns like (5) with no Experiencer, repeated below as (43). Nowadays they may be an offshoot of the (1) pattern, *Jim tells me that ...*, but the historical position is unclear. They may be older. They look similar to the present tense used for citation of authors of works seen as living, as in (25-26), one of which is repeated as (44):

(43=5) *Jim says that the forecast is bad.*

(44=26) c1430(c1386) Chaucer LGW 1139 *oure autour telleth us, That ...*

The latter belong primarily to a different register, though.

The active (43), at least with generalised and plural Informants, is old, as is its agentless passive variant (45):

(45) *It is said that the forecast is bad.*

Old English examples include:

(46) *ÆHom 9.66 Sume secgað þæt þu sy Iohannes se fulluhtere, sume Helias, sume Hieremias, oþþe sum witega*

some say that you are John the Baptist, some Elijah, some Jeremiah or some prophet

'some say that you are John the Baptist, some Elijah, some Jeremiah or one of the prophets'

(47) *GD(C) 187.8 ac hit sægd is, þæt ...*

but it said is that ...

'but it is said that ...'

I have not yet found an active, "conversational" example in Old English with an individual Informant. It may be that historically the (43) pattern derived from the passive (45), which in turn was a variant of the Experiencer-subject pattern (7), *I hear that*

Consider also the rather formal:

(48) *?It is brought to my attention that the forecast is bad.*

And (48) is related to yet another variant:

(49) *It comes to my attention that the forecast is bad.*

The latter is rather inconvenient for the Aktionsart explanation offered for the non-occurrence of (8).

3. Further material

For completeness I mention some further detail, though I have not incorporated it in the analysis given in §4.2.

3.1. Experiencer-subject patterns, Experiencer first person

The Experiencer is usually first person and usually singular, though a third-person Experiencer is possible:

(50) *(My spies have been on the alert.) They hear that ...*

Visser shows a less common use with second-person Experiencer from Middle English to the eighteenth century (1963-73: §791), and Strang mentions a similar usage with SEE (1968: §123 n.3(a)):

(51) *You see I've brought my music with me.*

Perhaps we should include examples like the following with DESIRE and ASK under the same heading:

(52) (?1465) *Paston 691.7 Sythen I vndirstande be my lady þat ye desire to knowe whedyr þat I shulde abide her stille or nowt ...* (Lightfoot 1979: 322)

since I understand by my lady that you desire to know whether that I should abide here still or not ...

'Since I understand from my lady that you wish to know whether I am to stay here or not ...'

(53) 1840 Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* xii (OUP ed. 1954: 90) *You ask me to give you a meeting.* (Visser 1963-73: §786)

But with (51-53) we begin to move away from the Information Present, in that (51) does not involve an act of communication, while all three presuppose the continued presence of the Informant in person or at least in correspondence.

3.2. Information

The Information is normally clausal:

(54) *?!Jim tells me of the bad forecast.*

(55) *The forecast is bad. !Jim tells me that/that news/that fact.*

But the following are OK:

(56) *The forecast is bad. That's what I hear from Jim/Jim tells me, anyway.*

- (57) *We are advised of the unacceptability of your proposal.*
- (58) *What's all this I hear about your wanting to go away?* (Charleston 1960: 219)

Visser cites the following historical examples (1963-73: §791):

- (59) 1801(1740) Richardson, *Pamela* ltr. xxii (Penguin ed. 1980: 81) *I hear bad news: that we are going to lose you: I hope it is not true?*
- (60) 1894 Mrs Humphry Ward, *Marcella* xii (1903 ed. [1984]: 275) *the influence of the judge, according to what I hear, will probably be against us.*

There are even cases where the Information is the only argument, that is, which lack both Experiencer and Informant:

- (61) *It turns out that the forecast is bad.*

I owe this example to Dick Hudson (p.c. 29 Aug 1990), as also some observations which suggest that INFORM and LET *know* differ in their acceptance of preposed Information, both as a sort of quotation and in the form of the anaphor *so*:

- (62) *The forecast is bad, Jim informed me/*let me know.*¹⁹
- (63) A. *The forecast is bad.*
B. *Yes, so Jim informed me/*let me know.*

I do not have an explanation for these differences, unless it is something to do with a greater association with embedded indirect questions for LET *know* than for INFORM. (The verbs mentioned in note 4 which govern indirect questions do not occur in patterns (62-63) either.)

4. Synchronic analysis for Present-day English

If my description of the facts of the Information Present is correct, or nearly so, how should these matters be handled? As far as I know, most kinds of formal grammar would not be able to deal with them adequately and would have to relegate them to pragmatics, thereby losing much hope of formal precision (and all hope of explaining the difference between (1-3) and (4)). It is not that *LET know* lacks a present tense. On the contrary, in a different context (4) can be made perfectly grammatical:

(64) *Jim lets me know that the forecast is bad about ten times a day. He's such a misery-guts!*

(65) *If Jim lets me know before Friday that the forecast is bad, I can change my plans accordingly.*

I do not know of a mechanism in GB theory, LFG or GPSG that would allow us to associate the pragmatic difference between (4) and (64-65) with the active ~ passive relationship discussed in §2.5.

4.1. Cognitive Grammar

The data I have uncovered seem to belong most comfortably in the framework of Cognitive Grammar, with the Information Present an example of what is called a **construction**. For a summary of what this means I quote Taylor (1989: 198-199):

Cognitive grammar [...] views a construction as the pairing of a specification of form with a specification of meaning. With regard to the former, a construction can be thought of as a kind of formula consisting of an ordered sequence of slots. Some elements are obligatory to the construction, others might be optional. Each element carries a specification of the kinds of item that can instantiate it. In some cases, only very general grammatical categories might be specified, e.g. noun phrase, transitive verb. Alternatively, a small set of candidates might have to be exhaustively listed; in the limiting case, there may be only one possible candidate. [...] As mentioned, the statement of a construction's formal aspects is linked to a statement of its meaning, which may include information on conditions and context of use. Meaning is therefore to be understood in a rather broad sense, to embrace both pragmatic and discourse-related matters.

One of the most elaborate defences of this position is Lakoff (1987). Among Lakoff's conclusions on syntax are the following (1987: 582):

- Grammatical constructions have a real cognitive status. ...
- Prototype-based categorization occurs in grammar. Radially structured categories exist there, and their function is to greatly reduce the arbitrariness of form-meaning correlations.
- The concept of motivation is needed in order to account for a great many of the regularities that occur in grammar.

Lakoff's Case Study 3 (1987: 462-585) is an exhaustive analysis of *there*-constructions which attempts to cover a wide range of data, including deictic *there*, as in (66), existential *there*, as in (67), as well as such types as (68-70):

- (66) *There's Harry with his red hat on.*
- (67) *There's a masked man outside.*
- (68) *There's a man been shot.*
- (69) *There's making dinner to start thinking about.*
- (70) *There walked into the room a tall blond man with one black shoe.*

Lakoff makes a number of specific predictions about the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of *there*-constructions and attempts to account for numerous similarities and differences among them. Of particular relevance are the discussions of pragmatics (1987: 470-482) and the various cases where one variant of a *there*-construction is said to be “based on” another.

4.2. A tentative analysis

I have not developed my analysis of the Information Present to the same degree of detail, partly because too much else must be presupposed about basic clause structure and tense usage. I offer a preliminary and tentative sketch of the “based-on” relationships involved in this small area of Present-day English. Figure 1 sums up these relationships, with the arrows numbered for ease of reference.

[figure 1 about here]

The overall claim, details apart, is that the Information Present should be regarded as a **construction**, a syntactic frame used in a definable extralinguistic or pragmatic context, with a prototypical core and various “motivated” extensions. The core is the pattern represented by *I hear that.../I see that.../I'm told that...*. The Information Present proper is the bottom portion of the diagram, zone III, covering patterns that ostensibly report a single act of communication in the past. The variants in zone II do not relate necessarily to a single act of communication, while zone I concerns states rather than communication. However, both upper zones play a part in the motivation of the Information Present proper. Horizontal and diagonal arrows represent the active ~ passive relation, which I assume must play a part in any grammar of English,

whether on a lexical or a syntactic basis. Two such arrows on the diagram are one-way rather than reciprocal, because they represent motivated extensions. Vertical arrows represent motivated extensions. Detailed discussion follows.

4.2.1. Experiencer-subject

I assume that sentences like

(71) *I think that the forecast is bad.*

(72) *I know that the forecast is bad.*

should be our starting point. Simple present tense is normal for stative verbs like THINK and KNOW, and any explanation for the form of (71-72) can be extraneous to the subsystem (or construction) that this paper is concerned with. That is, the tense of (71-72) is not the Information Present and does not need a special explanation.

Not shown in figure 1 because not in the present tense is the pattern illustrated by (73-75):

(73) *I've heard that the forecast is bad.*

(74) *I've seen that the forecast is bad.*

(75) *I've been told that the forecast is bad.*

Again, the use of the present perfect does not require special explanation here but will derive from general conditions on the use of the present perfect with dynamic verbs.

The arrow *I* represents the formation of a new pattern, a variation of (73-75), by the adoption of the present tense. Examples are:

(76=7) *I hear that the forecast is bad.*

(77) *I see that the forecast is bad.*

(78=10) *I'm told that the forecast is bad.*

I take it that the present tense in (76-78) is licensed by two main factors:

- (A) the desire to focus not on the actual act of communication but on the resultant knowledge
- (B) the continuing potential for the act of communication to be repeated

Together they suggest that the present tense is at least in part “based on” sentences like (71-72). There is a well-known metonymic relation between perception or acquisition of information and actual possession of knowledge, as demonstrated in the familiar etymological relationship between Latin VIDEO ‘see’ and OE WITAN ‘know’. To know something is to have acquired the knowledge.²⁰ I believe further that the pragmatic frame for the prototypical Information Present has the Experiencer actually present at the time that the Information was communicated, which distinguishes it both from the ‘citation of authority’ usage and from citation of a letter.

4.2.2. Informant-subject

Given the existence of (78) and whatever general mechanism relates actives and passives, expression of the Informant as topic will lead via arrow 2 to the formation of:

(79=1) *Jim tells me that the forecast is bad.*

Of course (79) also depends on more conventional sentences like

(80) *Jim has told me that the forecast is bad.*

However, derivation from the passive (78) is crucial – witness the non-occurrence of

(81=4) *!Jim lets me know that the forecast is bad.*

(82=6) *?!Jim says to me that the forecast is bad.*

4.2.3. No Experiencer

Let us return now to the starting point of the diagram, the cell containing sentences like (71-72). Non-expression of the Experiencer and the usual active ~ passive relation will lead via arrow 3 to (83-84):

(83) *It is thought that the forecast is bad.*

(84) *It is known that the forecast is bad.*

Probably the pattern of (85) plays a part too:

(85) *It seems that the forecast is bad.*

From (83-84) we can go via arrow 4 – on the basis of the same two factors as with *I* – to (86):

(86=45) *It is said that the forecast is bad.*

And from (85) via arrow 5, and perhaps also from (86) via arrow 6, we get (87):

(87=61) *It turns out that the forecast is bad.*

4.2.4. Informant-subject, no Experiencer

With the usual relation between agentless passives and actives with quantified or generalised subjects we can go from (83-84) via arrow 7 to sentences like:

(88) *People think that the forecast is bad.*

(89) *Everyone knows that the forecast is bad.*

From (88-89) we can go via arrow 8 in the familiar way to:

(90) *Everyone says that the forecast is bad.*

(91) *People say that the forecast is bad.*

Active types (90-91) are also related to passive (86) via arrow 9, which gives them additional support. These last-mentioned active ~ passive partners are all pragmatically distant from an individual act of communication. Compare the French contrast noted in §2.5.1 above between (92) and the unlikely (as an Information Present) (93):

(92=31) *On me dit que ...*

one me tells that = 'I am told that ...'

(93=29a) *?!Jean me dit que ...*
 John me tells that ...

Furthest removed from our starting point is pattern (94):

(94=5) *Jim says that the forecast is bad.*

This has several sources and is thus very well “motivated”. One is the normal perfect:

(95) *Jim has said that the forecast is bad.*

which – as with other source-patterns not using present tense – I have omitted from the diagram.

Within the diagram we can get to (94) via arrow 10 by adding an Informant argument to (86) and making use of the usual active ~ passive relation. We can also replace the generalised Informants of (90-91) by a specific individual – arrow 11. And we can omit the Experiencer argument of (79) – arrow 12.

There may even be a contribution to both (79) and (94) from patterns that belong to a rather more elevated register, the citation of authors as sources of living authority, mentioned in §2.4.1 above:

(96) *Mozart tells us that all women behave the same.*

(97) *Mozart says that all women behave the same.*

The present tense in sentences like (96-97) is presumably derived from the metonymy of work standing for author/composer, and the work’s present existence and influence. (I have not drawn an arrow connecting the (96-97) patterns to the Information Present.)

4.2.5. An intermediate subcategory

Another complication in the diagram is represented by the type

(98) *I understand that ...*

(99) *I figure that ...*

where the higher verb has a general use as state verb referring to the Experiencer's knowledge but a subsidiary dynamic meaning (arrow *I3*) referring ostensibly to the act of learning:

(100) *I saw Jim yesterday. I understand/understood (from him) that ...*

In the dynamic meaning it is possible to specify the Informant and/or the time of communication, at least with UNDERSTAND. (The verbs in (98-99) seem to allow the Information Present or the simple past but not, interestingly, the present perfect, perhaps because the state meaning hovering in the background would be inappropriate with the present perfect.)²¹ The pattern of (98-99) can be seen as intermediate between (71-72), where the higher verb is clearly a state verb and present tense is entirely straightforward, and (76-78), but I am not sure which way arrow *I4* should point.

5. Afterword

My brief essay in Cognitive Grammar in §4 will certainly not be the final word on this subject. Even the non-theoretical account given in §1-2 is subject to modification in the light of further data. In any event the material challenges the usual view of the relationship between actives and passives, in which the passive is seen as marked in relation to the active (and in some accounts, derived from it). It has long been known that some passives lack a corresponding active sentence, for example:

(101) *George was supposed to be a bit of a comedian.*

Example (101) and others have shown the inadequacy of assuming that an active underlies every passive. Now with the Information Present we seem to find a passive type which in some sense is more basic than its related active. The material also reminds us that tense, aspect and voice (and indeed presence/absence of modal) are not, as formal analyses tend to imply, wholly independent choices. It also offers a serious challenge to theories where syntax is autonomous or at least divorced from pragmatics.

Notes

1. In my conference paper, grandly entitled 'The Passive in Modern English', I tackled two different topics, otherwise unrelated, which suggested that selection of passive voice was not independent of other verbal choices. The material of the second half – on the cooccurrence of progressive aspect and passive voice – will now appear in my forthcoming book on English historical syntax. What follows here is the first half of the paper, revised and expanded.

I am grateful to Dick Hudson and Wim van der Wurff for their helpful, if sceptical, reading of an earlier draft, and to the participants in a Linguistics Seminar in Manchester.

2. See, for instance, Onions (1911: 110), Poutsma (1926: 254), Jespersen ([1961], 4: 28), Quirk *et al.* (1985: 181), Huddleston (1984: 147) on Modern and Present-day English. Poutsma summarises the topic as 'momentaneous verbs denoting the receiving, giving or soliciting of information'. For historical evidence see Mustanoja (1960: 484-488), Visser (1963-73: §791), Mitchell (1985: §§63-64).

3. Compare a normal present perfect referring to a past action:

a. *I've done something to my wrist.*

This would imply that the wrist still hurts. The simple present is unavailable in this context:

b. *!I do something to my wrist.*

("!" indicates inappropriateness in context, "?!" marginal appropriateness, "?" probable appropriateness, no symbol full acceptability.)

Huddleston emphasises the fact that use of the present tense in (1) implies that Jim still subscribes to the proposition (1984: 147). In support of this he draws our attention to the pragmatic unacceptability of continuing a sentence like (1) with

c. *but he now admits he was lying.*

However, his observation applies equally to the predictable present perfect use seen in:

- d. *Jim has told me that the forecast is bad.*

at least under normal intonation.

4. So do verbs and phrases with an indirect question embedded: ASK, DOUBT, WONDER, CONFESS *oneself unsure*, EXPRESS *doubt*. One group of verbs which does not seem very happy in the Information Present is DISCLOSE, REVEAL, MAKE *clear*, MAKE *known*.

5. "Informant" has little generality, of course. One might argue in Case Grammar terms that the Informant is an example of the rôle Source. Then we could include under the same heading expressions like *in the papers* in

- a. *I read ([ri:d]) in the papers that ...*

6. MENTION seems better in (5) in the context of a letter than a conversation. It may well be that reporting a letter belongs to a different pragmatic domain from reporting a conversation. Martin Barry has pointed out to me that it makes the present tense of LET *know* rather more acceptable than in (4):

- a. (I got a letter from Jim last week.) ?He lets me know that the forecast is bad.

And accepting such a difference would allow us to ignore the failure of WRITE to occur in the passive, at least when followed by a *that*-clause, which would improve the correlation mentioned in §2.1.

7. On the HEAR *say* construction see Visser (1963-73: §1229).

8. Brinton has some useful comments on FIND \forall *out* (1988: 173-174).

9. I stand by the asterisk on (11) despite

- a. 1623(?1601) Shakespeare *Hamlet* 2782 [IV.vi.11] *if your name be Horatio, as I am let to know it is* (OED s.v. *let* v.1 13)

I have found little other evidence of a passive of LET *know*, and unanimous rejection of the possibility by friends I have consulted. Visser has no examples (1963-73: §§2137-2139), while Jespersen has only (a) and (b):

- b. 1935 Sayers *Gaudy Night* ix (Coronet ed. 1990: 173) *What a pity you weren't let know, miss.*

To the latter (and other passives of LET + plain infinitive) he adds the comment: 'Some English correspondents object to this ... as not being colloquial English nowadays' ([1961], 5: 318).

10. I have since noticed that three grammarians with a strong historical bent, Onions, Jespersen and Visser, all confined discussion of the Information Present to Experiencer-subject examples.

11. I have looked for 3 sg. present tense forms of SAY and in Middle English also TELL in the concordances of Healey – Venezky (1980), Tatlock – Kennedy (1927), Kato (1974). Among some 850 OE examples with variants of 3 sg. pres. *segð* and 3 pl. pres. *secgað* (n.b. some *secgað* examples are 1 pl., 2 pl., or imperative), the nearest to an Information Present found so far involves a generalised Informant subject:

- a. *Ch* 1383(Harm 63) 9 *Git us man s[ege]ð þæt we ne moton þæs wurðe beon æt Holancumbe þe we hwilon ær hæfdon.*

yet us(DAT) one says, that we not may of-that worthy be at Holcombe that we at-times before had

'Moreover we are told that we shall not be allowed to possess at Holcombe what

we had in times past.'

The present tense at

- b. *Jn 16.17 hwæt is þæt he us segð ... ?*
what is-it that he us says ...

reflects a pres. *dicit* in the Vulgate, and anyway "he" (Jesus) is still present at the time of utterance.

Abbreviations for OE and ME texts follow the standard systems of the *Dictionary of Old English* and *Middle English Dictionary*, respectively.

12. The Information Present is very infrequent in the early *Paston Letters*. I hope in future work to demonstrate a more precise correlation between the appearance of the Information Present and the use of the indirect passive in *Paston*, based on the birthdates of the individual writers, though there does not appear to be an indirect passive in the scanty surviving output of the writer of (17).

13. There is an irrelevant complication in (19). My gloss implies that the first *of* goes with the lowermost verb *is com*: that is, that the preposition occurs otiosely in both "pied piped" and stranded position, as is common in Malory. It is conceivable that the first *of* goes instead with *telle*. The uppermost verb *tellyth* is not in question.

14. Example (22) is a draft in the name of the writer of (21).

15. Example (20) was printed by Caxton in 1485 with *him for he* (Lightfoot (1979: 260-261 n.1)), turning it into a more conventional direct passive with topicalised Benefactive.

Rather than use an indirect passive with TELL, Malory uses passives like the following:

- a. *Wks. 424.2 for hit was tolde me that ...*

- b. Wks. 525.4 'Sir,' they seyde, 'hit ys tolde us that ...'

16. I am very grateful for the patient help of the following informants: Pascale Bidet, Anne Berrie (French), Joan Sellent (Spanish), Ulrike Meinhof, Esther Grabe (German), Olga Fischer, Jan Vader, Mathilde Roza (Dutch), Kersti Börjars (general Scandinavian), Bente Elsworth, Helen Maclean, Trine Pedersen (Danish).

17. Indirect passives in Danish may be socially or stylistically marked, but even an informant who was doubtful about (36-37) was happier with (38). Diderichsen confirms that some indirect passives are in everyday use (1964: 56).

For completeness I list two Danish patterns without an equivalent in English, an Informant-subject pattern with generalised subject and an inflectional mediopassive, both of which can appear in the Information Present:

- a. *Man fortæller mig, at .../Man siger, at ...*
one tells me that .../one says that ...
- b. *Det fortælles/siges at ...*
it is-said that ...

Norwegian has a more limited indirect passive than Danish, but I have had no opportunity yet to check the incidence of an Information Present in Norwegian.

18. It is interesting that in Modern English, as opposed to Standard Average European, the simple present tense is no longer the normal form for *actual* present hearing and seeing, rather *can hear, can see*, though Visser records these only from the fifteenth century (1963-73: §1626) – perhaps not surprisingly, in view of the older meaning of CAN.

19. I have replaced Hudson's present tenses with past to avoid the distraction of LET *know* in the

Information Present.

20. There is a similar relationship between loss and absence of knowledge, so that something very like the Information Present occurs in

- a. *I forget what time the concert begins.*

21. A rather similar case, though with Informant as subject, is illustrated by the opening line of a famous song:

- a. 1934 Cole Porter "Miss Otis Regrets" *Miss Otis regrets she's unable to lunch today Madam.* (Werth 1988: 12).

Bibliography

Brinton, Laurel J.

1988 *The development of English aspectual systems: aspectualizers and post-verbal particles*. (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 49.) Cambridge, etc: CUP.

Charleston, Britta M.

1960 *Studies on the emotional and affective means of expression in Modern English*. (Schweizer Anglistische Arbeiten 46.) Bern: Francke.

Diderichsen, Paul

1964 *Essentials of Danish grammar*. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag.

Healey, Antonette DiPaolo – Venezky, Richard L.

1980 *A microfiche concordance to Old English*. Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware.

Hopper, Paul J. – Thompson, Sandra A.

1980 "Transitivity in grammar and discourse", *Language* 56: 251-299.

Huddleston, Rodney

1984 *Introduction to the grammar of English*. (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics.) Cambridge, etc: CUP.

Jespersen, Otto

1909-49 *A Modern English grammar on historical principles* (7 vols).
Heidelberg: Winter / Copenhagen: Munksgaard.
[1961][Reprinted London: Allen and Unwin.]

Kato, Tomomi (ed.)

1974 *A concordance to the works of Sir Thomas Malory*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.

Lakoff, George

1987 *Women, fire, and dangerous things: what categories reveal about the mind*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.

Lightfoot, David W.

1979 *Principles of diachronic syntax*. (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 23.) Cambridge, etc: CUP.

Mitchell, Bruce

1985 *Old English syntax*. Vols. 1-2. Oxford: Clarendon.

Mustanoja, Tauno

1960 *A Middle English syntax, I, Parts of speech*. (Mémoires de la Société Néophilologique de Helsinki 23.) Helsinki.

Onions, C. T.

1911 *An advanced English syntax:* (3rd edition.) London: Swan Sonnenschein / New York: Macmillan.

Poutsma, H.

1926 *A grammar of Late Modern English: for the use of continental, especially Dutch, students*. Part II, *The parts of speech*, section II, *The verb and the particles*. Groningen: Noordhoff.

Quirk, Randolph – Sidney Greenbaum – Geoffrey Leech – Jan Svartvik

1985 *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. Index by David Crystal. London/New York: Longman.

Strang, Barbara M. H.

1968 *Modern English structure*. (2nd edition.) London: Edward Arnold.

Tatlock, John S. P. – Kennedy, Arthur G.

1927 *A concordance to the complete works of Geoffrey Chaucer: and to the Romaunt of the Rose*. (Carnegie Institute of Washington Publications 353.) Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institute.

Taylor, John R.

1989 *Linguistic categorization: prototypes in linguistic theory*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Visser, F. Th.

1963-73 *An historical syntax of the English language*. Vols. 1-4. Leiden: Brill.

Warner, Anthony

1982 *Complementation in Middle English and the methodology of historical syntax: a study of the Wyclifite sermons*. London/Canberra: Croom Helm.

Werth, Paul

1988 "Some unconventional assertions", *Amsterdam Papers in English* 1.2: 3-23.

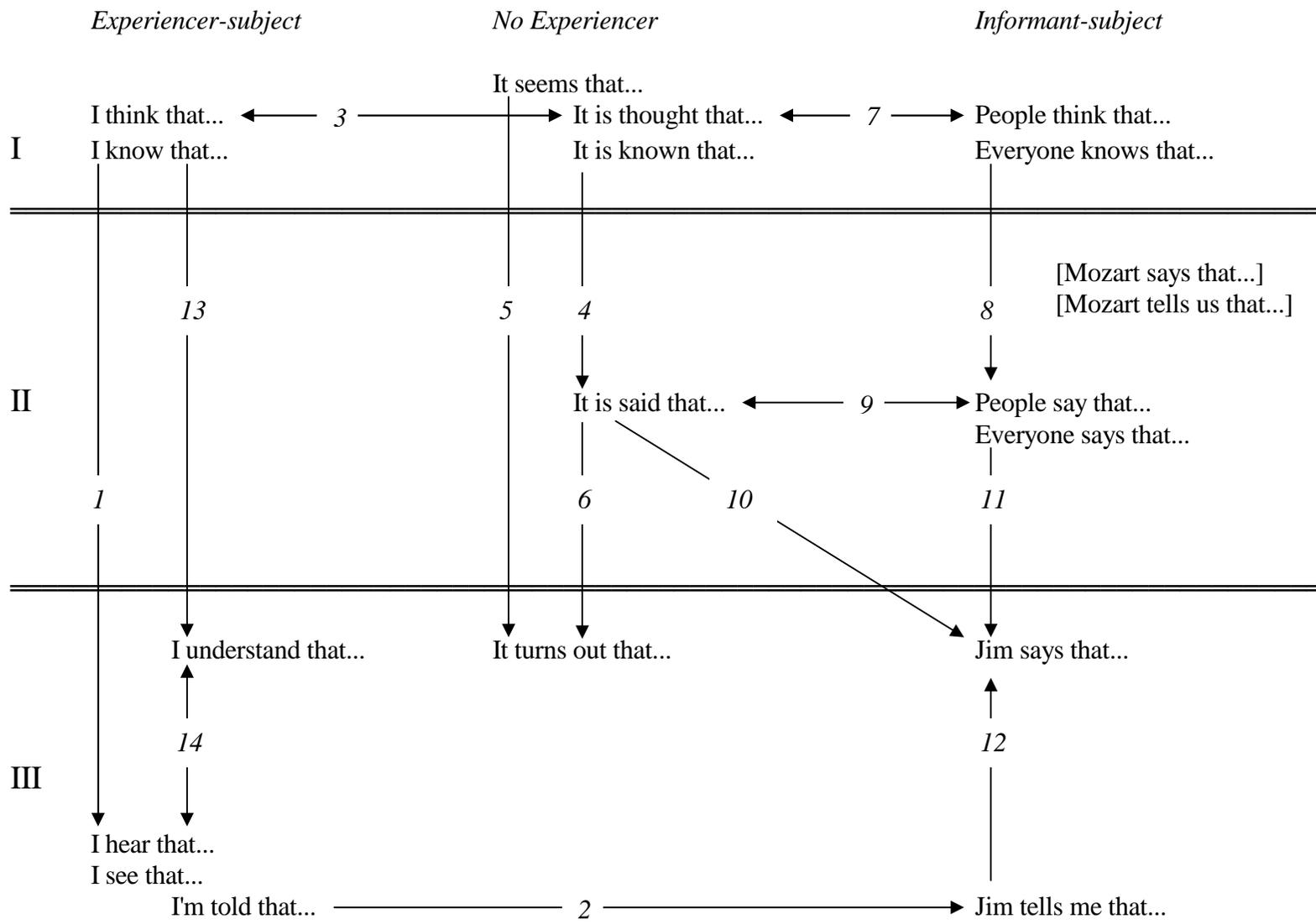


Figure 1: "based-on" relationships in the Information Present