Three Semantic Facets of Temporal Adverbial NPs in English

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1. Introduction

As do many other languages, English allows certain kinds of NPs to function as time-expressing adverbial modifiers of a sentence (or of a noun), without an associated preposition or other functional element. These temporal adverbial NPs can be largely categorized into three subgroups in terms of their different grammatical reflections of their meanings. The three subgroups (viz. those expressing time position, those expressing time frequency, and those expressing time duration) are exemplified by the sentences in (1) to (3) below:

(1) Time Position
   a. We met (on) that day. (Quirk et al. 1985: 693)
   b. We met (in) the spring of 1983. (Quirk et al. 1985: 693)

(2) Time Frequency
   a. He takes risks (*in/on) every day. (Quirk et al. 1985: 528)
   b. (On) Sundays we usually go for a walk. (Quirk et al. 1985: 694)

(3) Time Duration
   a. We stayed there (*for) all (the) week. (Quirk et al. 1985: 694)
   b. I lived there (for) three years. (Quirk et al. 1985: 694)

In what follows, focuses are placed on adverbial NPs expressing time position, such as those in (1), and arguments are restricted to some major semantic factors for the felicitous or grammatical occurrences of them. The factors involved are characterized in terms of granularity, prominence, and perspective as defined in such works as Langacker (1999) and Langacker (2008).

2. Three Semantic Facets of Adverbial NPs of Time Position

Major semantic properties of adverbial NPs of time position can be properly described in terms of such notions as granularity, prominence, and perspective. As argued for in such representative works as Langacker (1999) and Langacker (2008), these three notions pertain to our basic cognitive abilities, and the linguistic manifestations of the relevant abilities are clearly discernable in the way we construe the same conceptual content of a linguistic expression in alternate ways.

Thus, granularity (or resolution), which is characterized as “our capacity for conceiving and portraying an
entity at varying levels of precision and detail […] (Langacker 1999:5)”, is evident in such sets of expressions
as chianti > wine > beverage > liquid > substance and sprint > run > move > act > do.

One relevant kind of prominence is the ranking of cognitive domains by a lexical item. Langacker states
that “a lexical item ranks [original italics] these [(cognitive)] domains: it accords them particular degrees of
centrality [original italics] […] (1999:4-5)”. Thus, for the word aunt, the domain of kinship relations is central
to its semantic characterization, while it is rather peripheral for woman. Note also that the conventional ranking
that a lexical item imposes may be adjusted in special circumstances.

An instance of perspective is provided by a vantage point: “[i]n the absence of any contrary speci
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fication, the speaker’s [spatial or temporal] location is adopted as the vantage point by default (Langacker 1999:5)”.
Words such as upstairs and yesterday, for example, incorporate a spatial or temporal vantage point as an
inherent aspect of their meaning, the vantage points being the speaker’s current location or his/her time of
utterance.

In the remaining sections below, adverbial NPs of time point are semantically characterized along the three
semantic facets of granularity, prominence, and perspective, and it is argued that their felicitous or grammatical
occurrences are largely constrained in these semantic terms.

2.1. Granularity and Time Position

Nouns which denote the notion of time as their primary lexical meaning can appear as the head noun of an
adverbial NP of time position or time point (as long as they keep to other conditioning factors to be mentioned
in the following sections), as illustrated in (4) below:

(4)  John arrived that moment/minute/hour/day/week/month/year.  
     (Larson 1985:596)

Calendrical units, such as those in (5) below, also function as the head noun of an adverbial NP of time position.

(5)  John arrived the previous April/March 12th/Sunday/the Tuesday that I saw Max.  
     (Larson 1985:596)

Now, what is crucially involved in the occurrence of an adverbial NP of time position is the subjective construal
of its head noun as expressing a time position or time point. A span of time is construed as a time position
when its internal constituency is largely ignored for the immediate purpose of coarse granularity.

An objective definition of time position is linguistically irrelevant and impossible, since (i) various lengths
of time (or various time units culturally defined) can be construed as time position and (ii) an objectively
identical length of time can be construed as time position or time duration, depending on the surrounding
context. The examples in (6) below, in combination with the contrastive examples in (4), confirm the point (i);
the point (ii) is illustrated by the sentences in (7), the (a) example showing an adverbial NP of time position and
the (b) example an adverbial NP of time duration.

(6)  a. I’ve not received my pay this fortnight.  
     (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:1560)
   b. The problem is unlikely to be solved this decade.  
     (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:1560)
b'. Perhaps no American industry *this decade* with the possible exception of computer software and online technology, has grown as rapidly and pervaded society as thoroughly as legalized gambling.


(c) Of the Supreme Court’s paramount decisions *this century*, one stands out as virtually a sacred American text.


(7) a. He was here right (*at*) *that same week*.

b. He was here (*for/during/*in/*at*) *that whole week*.

Notice the presence of the word *right* in (7a), which dictates that the following temporal NP should be construed as representing a time position. Notice also that the adjective *whole* in the italicized temporal NP in (7b) rejects the time position construal of the subsuming italicized temporal NP, in that the adjective in question necessitates the mental scanning of the internal constituency of the relevant time span, resulting in a higher degree of granularity.

### 2.2. Prominence and the Domain of Event Succession

Nouns for which the temporal domain is central to their semantic characterization can easily function as adverbial NPs of time position, as is evident in the example sentences in (1), (4), and (5), for instance. For these adverbial NPs, the most relevant temporal domain is considered to be the one where a potential succession of happenings or events is involved (the domain of event succession, for short). Thus, to take the example of the adverbial NP *that day* in (1a), the domain of event succession is central for its construal in this context, and it is most highly ranked in its domain matrix (which includes, among others, the one where day contrasts with night and the one where a culturally-defined time-unit hierarchy is involved, beside the one of event succession). *

Other NPs are also capable of appearing as adverbial NPs of time position when the conventional ranking in a domain matrix is adjusted and the domain of event succession is accorded a relative centrality in the relevant context. Consider the italicized NPs in the following examples, where the domain of event succession is highly ranked at the demands of special circumstances:

(8) a. “[…] I’ve been teaching from it *this term* […]” *(Anita Brookner, *Lewis Percy*, Penguin Books, p. 222)*

b. One of the other students in my class *that quarter* was a polite officer from Sarpy County with whom I’d worked in the Joubert investigation, […]. *(Robert K. Ressler and Tom Shachtman, *Whoever Fights Monsters*, St. Martine’s Press, p. 124)*


d. Ronnie had been smoking a lot of cigars *this trip*. *(Bob Greene, *All Summer Long*, St. Martine’s Press, p. 76)*

The adverbial NP *this trip* in (8d) above will provide a good illustration of how a ranking adjustment occurs in a domain matrix and how a noun rather remotely relevant to the notion of time functions as the head noun
of an adverbial NP of time position. The event noun *trip* in its most conventional use is considered to rank in its domain matrix the domains of space and an itinerary more highly than, say, those of a budget and event succession. But when a series of trips is contextually salient, the domain of event succession is particularly relevant and highly ranked, and the construal of *trip* as denoting a time position is possible, as in (8d). Notice, in this connection, that the determiner *that* appears before the noun *trip*, which suggests that different trips are (temporarily) ordered and the succession of trips is actually relevant.

Now, as the following examples in (9) show, there are cases where nouns apparently denoting time do not function as adverbial NPs of time position:

(9)  
(a) John arrived *(on)* that occasion.  
(b) I saw her that war/my childhood/that occasion.

The reason behind the unacceptability above is explained along the following lines. The NP *that occasion* in (9a) or (9b) is ruled out, since the semantically equivalent and parallel NP *that time*, which is more common and frequently used for the same purpose, preempts or blocks the occurrence of *that occasion* (other things being equal). Note, however, that the noun *occasion* can fulfill the relevant adverbial function in sentence initial position or as the head noun of the antecedent of a relative clause, when a potential contrast (with respect to event succession) is strongly implied or when its adverbial status is unambiguous (vis-à-vis complements of the verb), as the following examples demonstrate:

(10) a. *That occasion* they never showed up.  
(b) I’ll do it the first occasion that comes along.

Essentially the same explanation applies to the unacceptability of *(that)* war and *(my)* childhood in (9b). When these nouns head the NPs which bear a special contrast, the NPs in question can function as adverbial NPs of time position as the sentences in (11) and (12) illustrate:

(11)  
(a) Our country has had three major wars. (In) the first war, I lost my father. (In) the second war, I lost my brother. 
    a’. Our country has had three major wars. I lost my father (in) the first war. I lost my brother (in) the second war.  
(b) The last war he fought in, he was seriously wounded.

(12) I have had six childhoods, and it was the last of my previous six childhoods. I saw her (during) that childhood, not the other ones.

The following set of examples also demonstrate that the event noun *encounter* can function adverbially when due contrast is signaled in sentence initial position.  

(13) a. *The earlier encounter* they beat him up.  
(b) They beat him up *the earlier encounter.*
2.3. Perspective and Specificity

Perspective, or more specifically a vantage point, plays a vitally important role for the felicitous use of an adverbial NP of time position. This is evident from the simple observation that the most basic adverbial NPs of time position, such as *now, today, yesterday,* and *tomorrow,* incorporate the vantage point of the interlocutor’s utterance time as part of their inherent meanings. And the existence of a vantage point is a prerequisite for the felicitous use of an adverbial NP of time position. Consider the following sentences:

(14)  
a. We met *that day.* (Quirk et al. 1985: 693)  
b. We met *the following day.* (Quirk et al. 1985: 693)  
c. We met *the previous day.*  
d. Mary saw John *the day of his birth.* (Stroik 1992:269)  
e. We can do that *another day.* (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:698)  
f. The accident took place a *certain day* in summer.

(15)  
a. Alice went on a picnic *(on) a sunny day.*  
b. *Alice went on a picnic on a day*  
c. *Mary saw John the day.* (Stroik 1992:269)  
c’. *She resigned the day.* (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:698)  
d. *Mary saw John on the day.*

For the acceptable sentences in (14), various sorts of vantage points can be recognized with respect to the italicized adverbial NPs of time position, while the sentences in (15) are unacceptable due to the lack of vantage points for the italicized temporal NPs. Let us, then, consider in what sense a vantage point is (not) identified for the examples in (14) and (15).

The vantage point for the adverbial NP *that day* in (14a) is deictically determined by virtue of the demonstrative *that,* which conveys the presence of the relevant vantage point in the previous discourse or which directly signals its presence by gesture or by some equivalent means.⁴ For the adverbial NPs *the following day* and *the previous day* in (14b) and (14c), the vantage point resides in the preceding context, and the premodifying adjectives *following* and *previous* linguistically signal its presence. The vantage point for the italicized adverbial NP in (14d) is directly specified by the PP *of his birth,* with the actual date of his birth pragmatically supplied. In (14e), the vantage point for the italicized adverbial NP *another day* is entailed by the word *another,* which presupposes the prior mention of the vantage point by which the day in question (i.e. another day) is delineated. The interlocutor’s mind or belief is crucially relevant for locating the vantage point for the adverbial NP *a certain day* in (14f): although the interlocutor does not reveal the actual or exact date, he or she has a specific date in his or her mind, as the adjective *certain* entails, and his or her mind is identified with the vantage point.

What about the ungrammatical sentences in (15)? It can be said that in all of them, a vantage point is not identified. In (15a) and (15b), the italicized temporal NPs do not reveal linguistically that a vantage point is
present, in that the indefinite determiner *a* does not presuppose that some definite date is involved, nor does the adjective *sunny*. In (15c) and (15c'), the definite determiner *the* does not properly function as part of an adverbial NP, failing to signal the existence of a vantage point for its relative lack of identifiability. Notice that the same statement applies to the example in (15d), where even the associated preposition *on* cannot introduce the following italicized temporal NP.

Now, notice that possible adverbial NPs of time position are not randomly specified but are related to each other by “grammatical extension” in that properties of the most basic adverbial NPs of time position are extended and derived ones (of varying degrees) become possible. The relevant properties are those that comprise the notion of “specificity”, i.e. a vantage point (or a reference point) and the definiteness of time. Thus, the vantage point for the most basic adverbial NPs of time position, i.e. the “time of utterance”, extends or shifts to “discourse information”, “pragmatic information”, and “the interlocutor’s mind/belief” for the more derivative adverbial NPs of time position. And definite time is not required and bleaches as the extension proceeds. If specificity is not recognized in temporal NPs with respect to a vantage point and the definiteness of time, these NPs do not properly function as adverbial NPs of time position. The following figure summarizes the relevant extension (and non-extension):

(16)

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now, today, yesterday
(time of utterance; definite time)
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that day, the following day
the day of his birth
(discourse information; definite time)
(pragmatic information; definite time)
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another day
(a certain day
(interlocutor’s mind; indefinite time)
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*the day
(no identifiable vantage point; non-definite time)
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a (sunny) day
(no identifiable vantage point; indefinite time)
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Notes

1 For the general grammatical properties of adverbial NPs of time frequency and time duration (and adverbial NPs in general), see Tani (1996).

2 The domain of a time-unit hierarchy represents a culturally-defined hierarchy consisting of such temporal units as century, decade, year, month, week, day, hour, minute, and second.

3 Various event nouns can function as the head noun of the adverbial NP of time frequency, as the following examples illustrate:

   (i)  a. Every election we can expect some foulup. (Bolinger 1992:25)
       b. Most games you’ll see half-drunk spectators throwing bottles. (Bolinger 1992:25)
       c. Some visits I find her sitting up and looking almost well. (Bolinger 1992:25)
       d. Every dispute we had with him we had to go to court. (Bolinger 1992:25)
       e. Two sessions they had to call another judge. (Bolinger 1992:25)

   Concrete nouns can also head the adverbial NP of time frequency:

   (ii) a. We correspond for almost a year, and each succeeding letter I could detect deepening signs of depression. (Bolinger 1992:25)
       b. She’ll receive beautiful roses every bouquet. (Ad for bouquet-of-the-month club) (Bolinger 1992:25)

Notice incidentally that some adverbial NP of time frequency are not introduced by a preposition:

   (iii) a. He takes risks (*in/on) every day. (Quirk et al. 1985:528)
       a’. In this country, we went through a countless number of wars, and *(in/with) each succeeding war, we could detect deepening signs of anger and despair.
       b. He takes risks (in) every period/lecture/game. (Quirk et al. 1985:694)

4 The following example sentences (i) and (ii) illustrate the anaphoric and demonstrative functions of the demonstrative that:

   (i) 1934 was a bad year. That summer the gambling houses were closed, … . (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:1563)
   (ii) There were a lot of jacarandas out there that November, weren’t there? (Said while watching a video of a November wedding) (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:1563)

5 “Non-definite time” is a makeshift term that highlights the distinctness of the day as opposed to that day and a (sunny) day in their adverbial function. The unacceptable the day, though definite in form, is functionally indefinite in that the purported vantage point is not identifiable.

References


Kobayashi, Keiichiro (1999) “Another Approach to Bare NP Adverbials as Nominals,” English Linguistics 16,