# Tense in the Latin Independent Optative

## By David H. Kelly, Upper Montclair

It is somewhat curious and amusing to observe how linguistic theories can reverse themselves within a relatively short period of time. Almost any Latin grammar that attempts to provide a rationale for the various subordinate clauses makes use of the notion of parataxis, i.e. the collocation of two originally independent sentences. Let us quote a recent example: Woodcock (1959) states that "Subordinate clauses originated in the placing side by side of two independent sentences, one of which came to be felt as dependent on the other; e.g., 'This is to be done: the master says (so)' became 'The master says (that) this is to be done.' The two sentences have become one, and the originally independent sentence 'This is to be done' is now a subordinate noun-clause standing as object to the verb 'says'." (98).

The clearest example of an independent optative finding its way into the object position of another sentence is the subordination that exists after verbs of fearing. Woodcock and just about everybody else explains *vereor ne hoc fiat* 'I am afraid that this may happen' in terms of an originally independent *ne hoc fiat* 'may this not happen.' (100).

Obviously there is an implicit assumption in this approach, viz. that subordination is somehow a more sophisticated type of grammatical expression to be denied *a priori* to very early stages in the development of a language. Robin Lakoff in her stimulating even if unpolished *Abstract Syntax and Latin Complementation*[1]) quite naturally rejects such an approach. She is unwilling within her transformational tradition to deny the possibility of subordination (and thus of linguistic creativity) even to Proto-Indo-European. I quote: "To say otherwise is to say that Proto-Indo-European differed in the most fundamental way from any other natural language that we know, including Hittite and Homeric Greek." (5f.).

Let us grant therefore that the traditional philological paratactic explanation of clausal subordination is dead—at least until the scientific pendulum has come full cycle. I find it charmingly ironic

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[1]) Cp. the review of Mrs. Lakoff's book by Fred W. Housholder, Language Sciences (Bloomington, Indiana) 6 (1969) 11–18, Lakoff's reply ibid. 10(1970) and 'Reviewer's Reply' ibid. 10 (1970).

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that we now find it useful to explain the so-called independent sub-
junctives—including the optative—as not really independent after
all but rather as subordinate clauses embedded generally as comple-
ments to some abstract predicate—an element subsequently deleted
as we move the sentence closer and closer to its surface form.

Consider the Vergilian line *o mihi praeteritos referat si Juppiter
annos* (*Aen.* 8:560) 'would that Jupiter would restore to me the
years that have passed.' In the deep structure of this sentence we
postulate the existence of an abstract predicate with the meaning of
wishing, call it VEL, taking this sentence ($S_1$) as a complement.
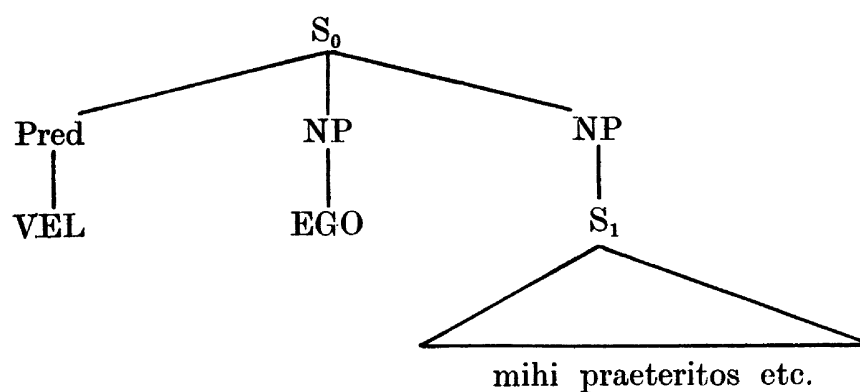


Mrs. Lakoff in her treatment of these sentences (176–182) con-
siders the abstract VEL to be a performative verb in the sense
defined by the English philosopher J. L. Austin (1962). Performa-
tive verbs like *appoint, command, dare, implore, say,* etc. are always
in the first person singular; their objects or indirect objects will be
second person. They cannot be negated and are always in the
present tense. The semantic difference for example, between 'I com-
mand you to go' and 'I commanded you to go' is readily apparent.
The first sentence is not at all a statement of fact but of course
actually effectuates the meaning of the performative.

However in postulating a performative necessarily linked to the
present tense Lakoff experiences some difficulty in trying to explain
the four tenses that occur in the Latin independent optative since
the rules of sequence of tenses would seem to block the occurrence
of the imperfect and pluperfect subjunctive. In primary sequence
(after a non-past verb) only the present and perfect tenses of the
subjunctive mood should occur. And yet imperfects and pluperfects
are found.

Imperfect Tense

1. *tecum ludere sicut ipsa possem* 'would that I could play with you as she can' (Catullus 2).

2. *utinam te di prius perderent quam periisti e patria tua* 'would that the gods had made away with you before you were lost to your country' (Plaut. *Captivi* 537).

3. *utinam ego tertius vobis amicus adscriberer* 'would that I had been enrolled as a third friend to you' (Cicero, *Tusc. Dis.* 5, 63).

4. *illud utinam ne vere scriberem* 'would that what I am writing were not true' (Cicero, *ad Fam.* 5, 17, 3).

Pluperfect Tense

5. *utinam res publica stetisset nec in homines cupidos incidisset* 'would that the republic had stood and had not fallen into the hands of greedy men' (Cicero, *de Off.* 2, 3).

6. *utinam istam calliditatem hominibus dei ne dedissent* 'would that the gods had not bestowed that cleverness on mankind' (Cicero, *ad Fam.* 5, 17, 3).

7. *utinam me mortuum prius vidisses* 'would that you had seen me dead first' (Cicero, *ad Quintum Fratrem* 1, 3, 1).

8. *utinam ille omnis secum copias eduxisset* 'would that he had led out all his forces with himself' (Cicero, *in Catilinam* 2, 4).

Lakoff's explanation claims that VEL in such sentences is actually the apodosis of a contrary to fact conditional sentence and thus must be considered as an imperfect subjunctive triggering secondary sequence in any embedded clause. "In this way, we can see how *Utinam id faceret*! 'I wish he were doing that!' gets its meaning. It is derived from a set of sentences like the following, with this deep structure:

(If it were a reasonable wish), I would wish it     S      "

he do it. (181).

But this amounts to a rejection of the theory that VEL is a performative since by definition performatives do not occur in the imperfect tense whether indicative or subjunctive.

The weakness implicit in such a theory consists in not making the abstract predicates abstract enough. VEL has nothing to do with imperfect subjunctive. It is a purely semantic entity while imperfect and subjunctive are grammatical categories introduced into the

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syntactic derivation of the sentence. That is to say, tenses like imperfect and pluperfect are language specific. We will find them here in Latin but not necessarily in other languages. The concept of time on the contrary is a universal notion in the sense that all men know the difference between the present, the past, and the future. It is a conceptual vehicle by which we penetrate into the intelligibility of being. As such it belongs to the semantic representation of language, that internal abstract world of knowledge, understanding, insight, predication, and aesthetic feeling. Needless to say there is no necessary connection between the three possible times we experience and the tense system of a given language. We begin simply with the axiom that time—like our total inner world of meaning— can be mapped onto a language, any language.

In their discussions of the imperfect and pluperfect tenses of the Latin independent optative, grammarians customarily use terms like hopeless, unreasonable, impossible, and unfulfilled. This would seem to suggest that besides the abstract semantic formative VEL linked to present time there is some justification for positing another predicate in such sentences. I will call this predicate VERUM meaning 'it is true that'. Since VERUM is not a performative, I can associate with it the time element PAST if that is what the meaning demands.

Let us sketch here the semantic representations of sentences 2 and 8 quoted above omitting what is not essential for our argument.
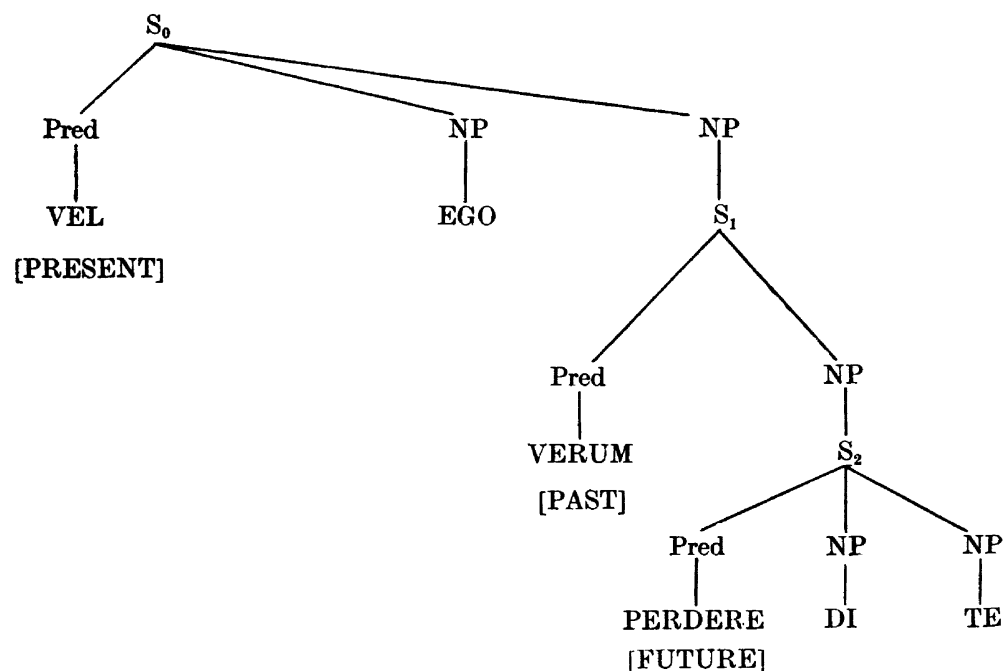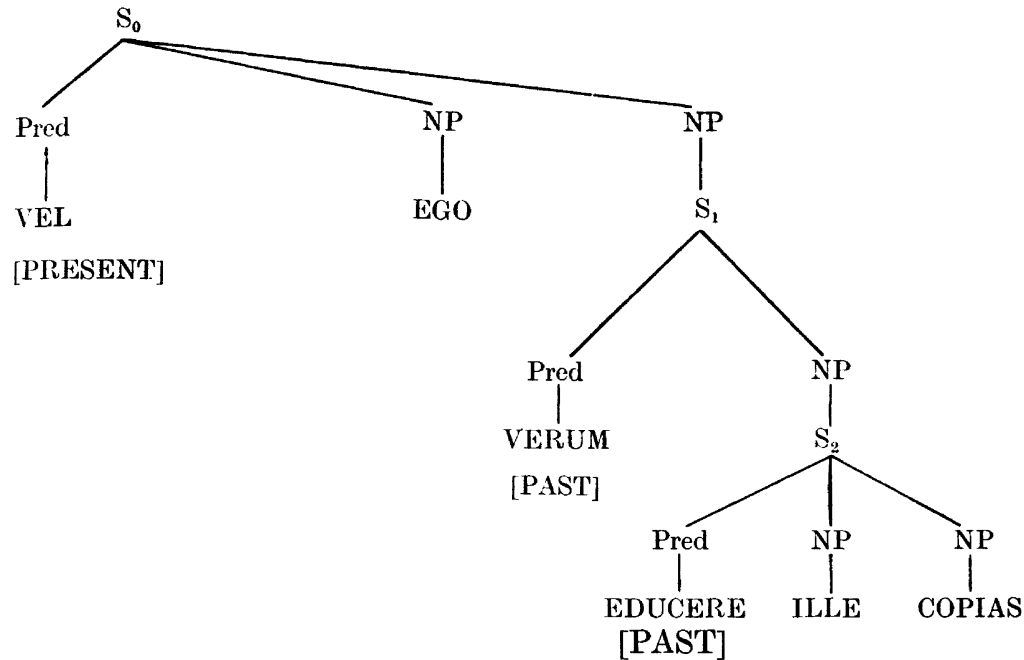
The two abstract predicates which do not appear in the actual sentence set up the basic meaning 'I wish it was true that . . .' In the first example the time of PERDERE is assumed to be in the future with regard to VERUM. When a verb in past time immediately dominates another verb in future time the rule of tense sequence will trigger a transformation assigning imperfect tense to the second verb. Similarly an occurrence of EDUCERE in the PAST with regard to VERUM will eventuate in a pluperfect in the final derived surface structure. Obviously many other things must happen in the syntax: the subjunctive mood must be introduced, most often *utinam* will appear to introduce the sentence, both VEL and VERUM will be deleted. What is most important in the present analysis, however, is the observation that the choice of tense can be directly related to the abstract semantic representation by means of the well-known rule of sequence of tenses.

*References*

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