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Article on the Time Sense of
the Child and Time in Relation
to Grammar. Erika Dühnfort

Sentence diagrams through the
Grades.

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THE SPECIAL CHARACTER OF RUDOLF STEINER'S INDICATIONS FOR GRAMMAR TEACHING - A SCIENTIFIC SYSTEM, A HUMAN SYSTEM.

(Although written about the German language, much is relevant to English.)

What perspectives open up if one tries to work with Steiner's special indication for grammar and grammar instruction, as also with the general basic work of his spiritual scientific discoveries, which are revealed in the example of the tenses in German!

1. The tenses and their relationship to different levels of a view of Time.

The way language seeks to express time as Present, Past and Future reveals much of its individual character. The tenses in German consist of

PLUPERFECT: He had worked
IMPERFECT: He was working
PERFECT: He worked
PRESENT: He works
FUTURE: He will work
FUTURE PERFECT: He will have worked

In this arrangement the Present is placed in the middle, from which it goes into the past in one direction and in the other into the Future.

To make clear how these forms live in daily speech here are several sample sentences between two people, A and B.

A: Do you want to call now?

B: (Looking at the clock) Two o'clock. They will just have their lunch break. I (ll) call in the evening. By then I've also got my case packed.

If we try to fit these sentences into the above arrangement then valuable observations can be made.

A: Do you want to call now. (Future tense with future meaning.)

B: Two o'clock.. They will just have their lunch break. (Future tense with Present meaning) I call in the evening. (Present tense with Future meaning.) By then I've also got my case packed. (Perfect tense with Future meaning.)

It is similar to the following examples:

A: How goes it with the dahlias?

B: One single one has come up.

A: And the rest?

B: The snails will have had fun with them.

In the first two sentences the tense and the meaning are in harmony. In the last sentence both fall apart; completion in the Future is used for an event lying quite far in the Past. For before the dahlias can begin to grow (of which only one has bloomed in the meantime) some kind of animal, presumably snails, has done them in. One can express it diagrammatically thus:

PLUPERFECT IMPERFECT PERFECT PRESENT FUTURE FUTURE-PERFECT

Then a disorder is revealed. If one accepts the Present tense for present events, Perfect tense for the past, and Future and Future Perfect for the future, then something here is not right. According to our feeling for speech, no one would mark the above sentences as incorrect. Then one must ask: What is going on? Is it to do with a weakness that has come in with

a certain exhaustion in the use of the tenses? This assumption is contradicted by the facts, for when our language was in a youthful state in Middle High German, already what we just expressed with Future sense was expressed by the Perfect tense:

That is soon done: That will soon be done
That one has soon seen: That one will soon have seen.

In order not to treat the question which is raised here superficially it is necessary to look at considerations of Time which live in human development, and how they appear from time to time in Past, Present and Future.

On the lowest level the passing of time appears as a straightline of separate events, of moments, seconds, minutes, hours, etc. A true picture for it is the sand of the egg-timer, the pendulum clock, the moving shadows which are thrown on houses, trees and mountains from morning till evening. Even what is fixed, the apparent movement of the sun and the constellations, forms a picture and basis for time measurement.

Here something important becomes apparent. If we want to keep the regularly moving time in the present, we make images with space connotations. We cannot make images which will totally take hold of time. That is not only to do with our inability, but reveals a difficulty in the thing itself, which shows itself also if we ask what words language has formed to express the phenomena of Time.

We can ascertain that the words which indicate concepts of time are etymologically derived from concepts of space: Zeit (time) has its basic meaning from what is limited; Alter (age) from Latin altus (tall) for what has grown up; Dauer (duration) from Latin durus: hard; Stunde (hour) from what stands-

The hour itself with its 60 minute divisions appeared only in the fifteenth century.

If we look for a way to express time on its lowest level, then we have to use repetition to make the passing of time clear: "again and again", as also when many events happen over a duration: "and that went on for a long, long time."

The most simple picture for time sequences is a straight line, the ray or axle, with or without subdivisions. Secretly the ray or axle form hides in the relative sequence of the six tense forms, yet one can come to it comparatively easily. When for example one observes the development of something living, such as a plant, then it leads to the knowledge that not only does an earlier form lead to a later, or a later follow after an earlier: Fruit and blossom work already in what is forming at an earlier time, in the green leaves and even in the seedling.

Forwards and backwards, the plant is only leaf, with the future germ inseparably united, so that one cannot think of the one without the other.
Goethe: letter 17 May 1787

A further step in the observation of time is reached by directing feeling and consciousness to the different forms in which time appears to man.

The past distinguishes itself quite clearly from present and future.

In the distant past: something can awake reminiscent of spatial images: "It was in ancient times" - in such expressions works something of a qualitative rather than a quantitative nature. "In grey pre-history": that expresses something absent and changes into the purely soul realm. The color description "grey" may still call up a pictorial impression, but it means however not a grey which would be perceptible to the bodily eye, rather the life of feeling senses grey as a picture for something still indistinct, which hides the possibility of all differentiation in itself.

Simply directing the attention to the realm of the past leads one into something peaceful. What has happened has happened, and it remains unchangeable. The effects can still be influenced; things can be turned one way or another; but if I crossed the street yesterday at a certain place where a loose stone caused my foot to turn, I can go today on the same way and avoid the dangerous place. But the path I went yesterday remains trodden the way I went, I cannot re-do what I did yesterday. That may in some circumstances give rise to a tormenting regret; it requires strength of soul to recognize the unchangeable quality of it. If we look at it with the eye of reason, however, it can have a certain freeing effect, because the observer clearly feels that no decision is required of him. He is not called upon to act as long as he remains in the orbit of the completed past. The past addresses his will forces only in so far as he tries to strengthen and expand the powers of memory. Thus imagination can be added to the established framework.

Quite other soul qualities arise when thought and feeling are turned to the future. Certainly it comes to meet a human being, but he clearly senses that he must go to meet it if it is not going to overwhelm him with all it can bring of pain and joy. The human being must go on a path where he to some extent thinks ahead, plans, comes to decisions and intentions. The "going into the future" can easily turn into being driven or impelled when wishes pursue or tempt, when they cause restlessness. Fear and anxiety can also make one restless in looking to the future. The human being will relate himself better to the future the more calmness he can bring, the more correctly he estimates not only his own possibilities, but also the objective relationships and above all that he takes consideration of the human being around him.

Between past and future stands the present, and it quickly becomes clear that the present can signify not only the borderline between backwards and forwards. The human being is in the best sense present, in as far as he frees himself from past and future, and at the same time can make effective past and future in the present moment, by both of which he has been educated.

To sum up:

The Past contains the unchangeable security, peace, standstill. The human being has acted; the event is completed. Wisdom can be won from looking back on the Past.

To the Future belongs our being open for any event, but also absolute insecurity. The human being wants to and will act; something will happen. The Future is to be met with readiness, courage and clear thinking.

The Present calls up action. What happens completes itself. Uniting all that could be learned from Past and Future and what can thus be won from them leads to the Present of the spirit.

Such beginning observations open up a way to two statements of Steiner about the forms in which Time appears.

The human being cannot calmly face future events as he can with the past. What happens in the future gives rise to human feeling and willing; the past is experienced in quite another way.

In a notebook of Steiner's from 1910 we find these lines:

Whatever Time hides behind you,
Face it with firm courage.
What lies before you in the future,
Await it with equanimity.

In following such considerations, one leaves the purely Time realm; one slips unnoticed across into regions of soul experience, where it is a question of free confrontation, where also human feeling and willing must be activated so that something can be born. Soul powers and activity are described, and the same thing applies whether courage is needed for the past or equanimity for the future. We do not have to do any more with an indifferent, expressionless ray of time. In the realm of the soul of man Time forms itself in realms of varying color, sometimes of a quite different character. The realm of soul opens up in which counting and measuring do not make any sense. And similar ways of moving and flowing are not visible when past, present and future are considered.

The continuous process of Time grows more intense if a view is expanded to what could one day be possible, what can be, and perhaps what should be, expanded to the pre-birth and after-death existence of the human being. In a surprising connection Steiner completes this expansion in the lecture of Jan. 19, 1923. He looks at the possibilities which are allowed to modern man for experiencing the concepts of Truth, Beauty, Goodness, again filled with real content.

He presents that Truth is related to what we perceive as what has become of our physical body, how Truth is an inheritance which unites us with our spiritual past, with the time before birth.

The experience of Beauty Steiner connects with the experience of the etheric body in all its living activity ... "Where Beauty is experienced the etheric body reveals itself". In this process "man joins his earthly being again to pre-earthly life". That is: the present is experienced,

but not without relation to the past. "Man connects himself through the beauty of a picture with the spiritual worlds from which he has gone into his earth existence."

Man achieves the sum of forces of soul life "when he fills himself with goodness." And through calling up, not now pictures, but real forces "Man adds his earthly being to his spiritual one." Not just a picture of a connecting here, but a connecting with himself. "The experience of Good is a real connecting which is a direct indication of the world into which man enters when he passes through the gate of death."

The whole thing many be summed up: It could be said that the three concepts of Past, Present and Future, in as far as they are concerned with a fully human life, receive (when they are correctly conceived), a significant content through the other concepts of Goodness, Beauty and Truth.

The reality of such knowledge lies far above the concepts of Past, Present Future as sections on a timeline. It reaches out to more than a timeline. It reaches out to more than a timeline can picture. There is revealed to the inner eye what time in its threefold aspect is in the soul-spiritual realm, what is active when human feeling and sensitivity are directed upon it. It is possible on the basis of Steiner's investigations to go one stage further, through a look at the experience of time and the development of time consciousness in the child.

2. The Child's consciousness of Time and its Expression in Speech.

The expressions NOW and CONTINUALLY remain undifferentiated for the child for a long time. Even when adverbs of time like TODAY, NOW, TOMORROW, SOON already appear in the child's speech, they should not be taken as indications of a true sense for time. Everyone can tell this who has had to do with children. It can be that the first subdivisions in the unity of the expansive present light up in the consciousness so markedly that they will not be forgotten. Perhaps the child notices that the place in the garden where he trudges through the snow is the same one where he once picked rhubarb leaves to make sunshades. The change in the seasons is recognized for the first time. The supposition is a memory which is compared with the present moment. This memory forms itself gradually. Clara and William Stern, whose book "Die Kindersprache" (1907) remains the standard work today, observed:

The child gains control over complex time statements very late, and concepts of questions about WHEN and HOW LONG appear last of all.

On the basis of their observations with their own children the Sterns adopted the period of two years six months to three years nine months of age. French observers noticed the correct usage of WHEN in girls of four years eight months.

Especially significant is the way in which on the one side the expression of time, and on the other, the clear understanding of it, interplay together. The idea of the future arises, inexactly indicated by adverbs such as TOMORROW, TOMORROW LUNCHTIME, etc., which indicate

a future time, but a very vague one. Childish feelings reach into the future with wishes, anticipations, will impulses. Much further away is the use of the future tense of the verb.

On the other hand verb forms for the past appear already in the third year, and can even be conjugated with the past participle. Yet the child's consciousness does not reach for a long time into the past; it remains far from childish feeling and does not entice him. We see here a crossing of time consciousness and time expression in child development.

Future interests press early into the consciousness. His first control is with the help of time adverbs, often vaguely used. For the German child future forms with WERDEN appear very late. Even if the form is correctly used it is used very seldom, even up to the 8th grade. This research of Stern was done in the eight-graded Volksschule.

The child is very little inclined to the past. Stories and descriptions by parents and grandparents are placed by the child in a sort of general present. But the child takes up a verb form early with a particular aspect of the past, with a specific extent, signifying something completed.

The child expands his concept of the present over everything that he meets and which comes to meet him. It happens only gradually that he reaches the significant point when the former SOON and NOW expand into JUST, RECENTLY, ONCE, EARLIER.

Above all the child only slowly reaches the ability to recognize a time sequence. Piaget maintained that the ability to tell a story, in the right sequence, comes only in the 7th or 8th year.

Looking at the use of the verb, the word for time: In early speaking the child uses the form indifferent to time, the infinitive. Then slowly follow the forms of the present and some past participles. Speech remains at this stage for a long time.

If one wishes to come to a general picture, then it is necessary to add one more observation. Already in the third year the child uses plenty of auxiliary verbs which indicate a modal sense (in German dürfen, können, müssen, etc.) such as can and must. Little Hilde Stern could use them all fluently at 2½ - with the exception of sollen (should). The others she used with reference to her own self as I MUST, or HILDE MUST, etc.

In the past participle, which appears early in speech, there lies a modal quality, even the completed and fulfilled. The modality, every HOW, is related to the realm of quality and avoids all counting and measuring. The child's feeling grasps alone this qualitative side. Clearly the child stands from the point of view of the way an event takes its way, much more than in the purely time aspect.

If one tries to draw conclusions from the above facts there arises the question: Is there not a time aspect of the qualitative and modal before it passes into the region of what can be counted and measured, the physical-space realm? Old High German used only Present and Imperfect. That was also true of Middle High German. Before WERDEN was used to

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form the future the use of SOLLEN and WOLLEN (shall and will) were equally valid.

Translator's note:

Werden (to become) is used to form the German future as "I become to sing".

The strictly correct use of the future in English is

I shall sing
Thou wilt sing
He will sing
We shall sing
You will sing
They will sing

An English speaker does not need to worry about this too much until he starts to learn German, and has to contend with SOLLEN and WOLLEN as well. Wollen is used in the sense of "I have the willpower to" and SOLLEN is used in the sense of being obliged to do something, to have to.

An anecdote is told about a man in the sea who said "I will drown and no one shall save me", so they let him drown. Here in German you would use WOLLEN for will and SOLLEN for shall, and the future does not enter into it at all.

English is not using the future either, but superficially it might sound like it.