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# *Would* as a tense marker in English

By Carl Bache

## INTRODUCTION

This paper<sup>1</sup> offers a description of *would* as a past future tense marker in English. In particular, I shall examine its use in narrative examples like the following:

(1) Of the newspapers, only the tabloid-sized *Washington Daily News* reported what had happened. In a drafty room at the Library of Congress, with the light on her microfilm-reading machine flickering the whole time, a pregnant Madeleine **would find** the headline, at the bottom of page thirteen, accompanied by about an inch and a half of print: NEGRO CHEF KILLS WIFE<sup>2</sup>.

In this passage *would find* is used to point forward to a later process<sup>3</sup> than the one referred to by *reported* in the fictional universe created by the author. In instructional semantic terms, *would find* ‘instructs’ the reader to mentally ‘look ahead’ to a process of ‘finding’ which takes place after the point reached in the storyline. Quirk et al. (1985: 218) call this usage “rare” and characterize it as “literary narrative style”. Leech (1987: 108-9) further notes that ‘back-shifted’ or ‘reported past future’ is “many times more common than the direct future-in-the-past *would*”. Neither Quirk et al. 1985 nor Leech 1987 actually re-

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1 I am grateful to Cindie Aaen Maagaard and Nina Nørgaard for comments on a draft version of this paper.

2 From Edward P. Jones *The Sunday Following Mother’s Day* in the collection *Lost in the City*, Amistad 2003, p. 120; boldface added.

3 The term ‘process’ is here used in its standard systemic functional way to refer to any situation, or state of affairs, expressed by a verbal group, whether dynamic or stative.

cognizes *would*, or even *will*, as a tense form, but rather as a form with certain temporal, or tense-like uses in addition to its modal meanings. Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 208ff.) express a similar view. In Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, *will* is accepted as *the* future tense in the central primary tense system (along with the present and the past), while *would* is not even included in the extended 'System I', which, according to Halliday, comprises all finite core tenses (a total of 36 tenses), cf. Halliday 1976 and Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 335ff. Finding much inspiration in Harder's approach to tense (cf. Harder 1996), Davidsen-Nielsen and I propose a serial tense model consisting of four scope-related choices realizing 16 tenses (Bache & Davidsen-Nielsen 1997: 286ff.)<sup>4</sup>:

±past (±future (±perfect (±progressive)))

The complex choice of {-past (+future)} is realized as present future *will*, and the complex choice of {+past (+future)} is realized as past future *would*. In other words, Davidsen-Nielsen and I recognize both *will* and *would* as central members of the tense category. In what follows, I want to present a number of arguments for assigning this status to *would* and to examine in further detail one of its important uses, the narrative past future. For relevant details in connection with the metalinguistic framework for my discussion, including the nature and organization of categories, as well as the non-monadicness of English verb forms, see Bache 2002.

## REASONS FOR RECOGNIZING WOULD AS A PAST FUTURE TENSE

### *Past future would in narration*

The point of departure for my discussion is the use of *would* to instruct the hearer or reader to perform a mental look ahead, as in example (1) above and the following<sup>5</sup>:

- (2) The first driver off the ferry was a fool. He was so stunned by the beauty of the woman he saw walking toward him that he turned off the road into the stony sand of the beach; his car **would be** stuck there for over an hour, but even when he realized his predicament, he couldn't take his eyes off Marion. He couldn't help himself. Marion didn't notice the accident – she just kept walking, slowly.

For the rest of his life, Eddie O'Hare **would believe** in fate. After all, the second he set foot on shore, there was Marion.

<sup>4</sup> This model is a refinement of earlier work on tense, cf. Davidsen-Nielsen 1985, 1990 and Bache 1985, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> From John Irving, *A Widow for One Year*, Ballantine Books, p. 33; boldface added.

As has been pointed out by many grammarians, this particular use of *would* (among several others, including modal ones) is restricted to narration, and it could perhaps therefore be argued that it should not count as a genuine past future tense: ‘past’ is not past in the ordinary deictic sense (i.e. it does not instruct the hearer or reader to look back in real time at a past process relative to the present moment of communication) but is rather a conventional form used for presenting processes within a narrative framework and for carrying forward the central storyline (cf. Bache 1986). If the past in the narrative past future is not genuinely past in meaning, then the future is not really future in meaning either: it does not instruct the hearer or reader to look ahead to a process which is future relative to some deictic past time orientation. However, what the narrative past future does is instruct the hearer or reader to look ahead at a process which is ‘future’ relative to the point reached in the storyline by means of past tense forms. The narrative past future thus has a function which is very similar to that of deictic tense forms but provides its ‘temporal’ orientation strictly within a narrative framework. Only if we accepted a limitation of genres with respect to observational and descriptive adequacy, or indeed, if we granted empirical superiority to a particular non-narrative genre, can we afford to disregard the past future in narration as a valid tense form.

Having argued for a genre-embracing approach to the status of the past future, it is also important to point out that *would* used in this way entails the actualization of the process referred to (to use Huddleston & Pullum’s terminology, cf. 2002: 198). Thus, in example (2) above, the first driver’s car *was* indeed stuck in the stony sand of the beach for over an hour, and Eddie O’Hare *did* believe in fate for the rest of his life, again of course within the framework of the narration offered by John Irving. The two processes come into narrative existence as a result of being referred to by the past future verb groups. In this respect, past future *would* + infinitive differs somewhat from expressions with BE *going to* + infinitive. While this expression, unlike *would*, is possible in an ordinary everyday conversation about a process which is future in relation to some deictic past time, it often has a negative orientation towards the actualization of the process referred to:

- (3) They **were going to be** present at the reception (but didn’t make it).
- (4) She **was going to kiss** him (but then his girlfriend barged in).

In these examples *was/were going to* almost serves as a preamble to a *but ...* and is thus hardly a better candidate for the past future slot in the tense system (for a detailed discussion of *will/would* versus BE *going to*, see Bache *forthcoming* and *in preparation*, in which I conclude that BE *going to* is not a central member of the tense category, as claimed by Halliday and Matthiessen, but rather an important supplementary marker).

Before taking a closer look at the use of past future *would* in narration, I would like to offer two other reasons for treating *would* as a central member of the English tense system: its use in projected clauses and its use in conditional sentences.

### ***Past future would as a projected tense***

Past future *would* is used in both explicit and implicit projection of speech or thought, e.g. in indirect speech (cf. Bache & Davidsen-Nielsen 1997: 311ff.):

- (5) There **will be** another meeting soon  
→ The dean said there **would be** another meeting soon
- (6) My commanding officer **will regard** that as cowardice  
→ Peter said that his commanding officer **would regard** that as cowardice

Projection is here completely neutral: present future *will* is projected into past future *would* without a change in actional, modal or any other categorical meaning. The relationship between projected past future *would* and non-projected present future *will* is thus identical to the relationship between e.g. a projected past and a non-projected present, or between a projected past perfect and a non-projected past, as in the following examples:

- (7) There **is** something wrong with Harry.  
→ The dean said there **was** something wrong with Harry.
- (8) My commanding officer **sent** my best friend home.  
→ Peter said that his commanding officer **had sent** his best friend home.

In my view, it would be descriptively more adequate to accommodate all instances of neutral projection within the tense category, and not just some of them. If *will* is included as a tense form, but *would* is excluded, as Halliday and Matthiessen suggest, the projection in examples (5) and (6) would have to be described with reference to some other category than tense, while the projection in examples (7) and (8) would be a matter of tense-internal variation. If, on the contrary, we accept both *will* and *would* as tenses, projection can be described as a purely category-internal phenomenon which involves backshifting of {-past} to {+past} (irrespective of later choices in the serial tense system) and of {+past} to {+past (+perfect)} (again irrespective of other choices in the system), cf. Bache & Davidsen-Nielsen 1997: 312f.

### ***Past future would in conditional sentences***

In both narrative contexts and in projection, tenses can be said to serve certain superordinate communicative functions, i.e. functions which differ from more general, neutrally

defined basic functions but which may well be naturally derived from them. Within such a framework, tenses can be seen as a resource for a variety of such superordinate functions. What I have argued so far is that although tenses may well assume certain specialized functions in narration and projection which may seem temporally marginal, it is descriptively more adequate to accommodate such functions within the domain of the tense category – at least in the case of *would* – than to have to appeal to other categories in addition to tense, or to exclude certain verb forms from the tense category on account of a somewhat deviating functional repertoire. Conditional sentences are yet another area where tenses are recruited to serve a superordinate communicative function (that of imposing a condition), and again the use of *would* turns out to be significant: it fits in naturally with (other) tenses in the often tight pattern of forms used in connection with conditional sentences. The other forms found in this particular sentence type are often considered unproblematic as tense forms: e.g. the present, the present future, the past, the past perfect, etc.

As noted by Bache & Davidsen-Nielsen (1997: 269f.) and many other grammarians, in a conditional sentence the process described by the apodosis (the matrix) is typically causally dependent on the one described by the protasis (the subclause) and either coincides with it or follows it in time, as in e.g. *If you close the door, I will tell you my innermost secret*, where the telling of innermost secrets is made conditional upon the prior closing of the door<sup>6</sup>. When the finite predicator in the protasis is realized by a present verb form, such as *close*, the finite predicator in the apodosis is realized by a present future form, such as *will tell*. Both tenses point towards the future (but of course with a certain sequential implication). Thus, a present tense form within the scope of a conditional operator, such as *if*, corresponds to a present future tense form outside this scope. In other words, the two tenses enter what may be termed a ‘conditional pair’, in that they ‘go together’ in conditional sentences. When the finite predicator of the protasis is past without past time meaning, the finite predicator of the apodosis is a past future, as in *If she asked him, he would be angry*<sup>7</sup>. The conditional pair of verb forms here regularly consists of the past and the past future, and the effect of using this pair is to indicate that the processes described by the two clauses are unlikely to occur. And finally, when the finite predicator of the protasis is a past perfect (‘past in past’), the finite predicator of the apodosis is a past future perfect, as in *If you had told them the truth, they would all have rushed out*. Here the condi-

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6 I am here disregarding conditional sentences like the following, in which the dependence of the conditional subclause on the main clause is reduced to a much looser sense of relevance or inference: *If you are hungry there's some left-overs in the fridge and If today is Friday, he is here already*.

7 A past form in a protasis may also express genuine past meaning, as in *If you really saved her from her violent husband, you are a hero!* In such cases the condition hinges on the actual past occurrence or truth of the past process, and there are fewer restrictions on the tense of the apodosis.

tional pair expresses counterfactuality: the condition expressed by the protasis instructs the hearer to imagine an alternative world that negates the real world, and the apodosis offers a scenario in that alternative world. What we see in these three common constellations is a kind of ‘forwardshifting’ (i.e. the opposite of the backshifting of the primary tense choice that we noted in connection with projection)<sup>8</sup>:

Protasis		Apodosis	Macro function value
IF + present	⇒	present future	(neutral condition)
IF + past	⇒	past future	(condition + bias towards non-occurrence)
IF + past perfect	⇒	past future perfect	(counterfactual condition)

The interesting point in the context of this paper is that unless we accept *would* as a tense form on a par with *will*, we cannot capture – as a category-internal phenomenon – the regularity with which finite predicators in conditional sentences are often realized in conditional pairs. As a very general rule of thumb we can say that whichever tense choices are made for the protasis ({±past} and {±perfect}), {+future} is a regular additional second choice for the apodosis<sup>9</sup>. With Halliday’s tense category, only the first conditional pair, the one consisting of the present and the present future, belongs unambiguously to the tense category (both forms being proper tenses in his model). Halliday is forced to consider the other two pairs to be combinations of a realization from the tense category with a realization from another category (only the past and the past perfect being proper tenses in his model). Now, since it is in any case relevant to consider the use of tense markers in conditional sentences, adopting *would* + infinitive as a tense allows us to describe the regularity in the formation of conditional pairs as a category-internal phenomenon.

## A CLOSER LOOK ON PAST FUTURE WOULD IN NARRATION

In section 2.1 above, I argued for a genre-embracing approach to *would* as a past future tense on the basis of its use in narration to direct the hearer’s or reader’s attention to a process which is ahead of the point reached in the storyline. I also pointed to the fact that,

<sup>8</sup> In this table, IF is used to indicate ‘any conditional marker’.

<sup>9</sup> An alternative is of course to modalize the apodosis, as in *If you forget your passport, you may well get into trouble, If you closed the door, they might get very upset and If you had brought your wife, we could have settled the matter once and for all.*

unlike *BE going to*, *would* always entails the actualization of this process. In this section I shall take a closer look at this particular use of *would* in narration.

First of all, it is important to consider the specific function of past future *would* in the context of how other tenses are used in narration. Like other superordinate communicative functions, such as the projection of thought and speech and the stipulation of conditions, narration introduces a particular communicative framework, a kind of stage or mental space, which overrules or assimilates the ‘normal’ function of tense forms to suit special purposes. Within this framework, each verbal group expresses a process in the narration, and in each case the narrator instructs the hearer or reader to locate this process, not in real time relative to the moment of communication, but in the story which the reader or hearer is prompted to re-create in his or her mind. This re-creation involves mental presence at the ‘occurrence’ of the processes expressed (for discussion and illustration, see Bache 1986). Each process ‘takes place’ in ‘story time’ and both the narrator and the hearer or reader are ‘present there’, as it were, the former as the ‘creator’ and the latter as the ‘re-creator’. In order to appreciate the way tenses are used in narration we need to establish the concept of ‘narrative zero-point’ within this scenario. Like the ‘real’ deictic zero-point in much everyday conversation, i.e. the moment of communication, the narrative zero-point serves as a basis for the orientation of processes, viz. the processes making up the narration. Like the deictic zero-point, the narrative zero-point is in constant movement but it moves, not as real time passes, but as the plot progresses: it represents the stage reached at any time in the storyline, i.e. the stage holding the hearer’s or reader’s attention in the process of re-creation, and thus provides a basis for the orientation of other processes that are relevant for this stage whether they precede, coincide with or follow it. It is thus a vantage point for looking back at ‘earlier’ processes or forward to ‘later’ processes, or for looking at processes simultaneously unfolding. As noted in section 2.1., typically the past is used as the conventional, unmarked tense form to bring the narration forward. If the narrator wants to instruct the reader or hearer to look back at an earlier process (strictly speaking, to re-create a process at an earlier point) in the storyline, he or she will typically use the past perfect, as in the following example<sup>10</sup>, which shows both how the past brings the plot forward and how the past perfect points to earlier processes.

- (9) Harper **paced** for several seconds around the wide table on which **sat** a scale model of the PODS satellite – a cylindrical prism with multiple antennae and lenses behind reflective shields. Gabrielle **sat** down, her dark eyes watching, waiting. The nausea

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<sup>10</sup> Dan Brown *Deception Point*, Pocket Books, pp. 377-8; boldface added. For more discussion of the use of tense in narration, see Bache 1986.

in Harper's gut **reminded** him of how he **had felt** during the infamous press conference. He'd **put** on a lousy show that night, and everyone **had questioned** him about it. He'd **had** to lie again and say he was feeling ill that night and was not himself.

Now, if pointing backwards to an earlier process in a narration is a function of tense, why should not pointing forward to a later process be one? The argument is similar to the one proposed for projection and conditional sentences in sections 2.2 and 2.3 above: if 'temporal' (or sequential) orientation within a narrative context is to be treated as a category-internal phenomenon, past future *would* must be accepted as a tense form on a par with the past and the past perfect.

But there are other arguments. One of them concerns the frequency and style of past future *would*. Having looked for examples of this form in a few more or less randomly selected texts, I find it difficult to support the somewhat dismissive claim made by some scholars that narrative past future *would* is "rare" and belongs to "literary narrative style" (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 218) or that it is "restricted to formal literary style" (cf. Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 212). Nor does its meaning strike me as specialized beyond normal temporal meaning to something like 'was/were destined to', as argued by Wekker (1976: 15) with reference to one of Leech's examples *Twenty years later, Dick Whittington would be the richest man in London* (cf. Leech 1971: 48). The basic meaning of past future *would* is simply to direct the reader's or hearer's attention to a process further ahead, and with this meaning it is used freely in narration, literary as well as non-literary, and it is neither particularly formal nor particularly informal. In the following two examples there are six more of the many instances of past future *would* in John Irving's *A Widow for One Year*:

- (10) At sixteen, Eddie O'Hare was suspended somewhere between childhood and adulthood. In Eddie's opinion, there was no better beginning to any story than the first sentence of *The Mouse Crawling Between the Walls*: "Tom woke up, but Tim did not." In Ruth Cole's life as a writer – and she **would be** a better writer than her father, in any way – she **would** always **envy** that sentence. And she **would** never **forget** the first time she heard it, which was long before she knew it was the first sentence of a famous book. (pp. 13-14; boldface added).
- (11) As for Eddie's favorite book by Ted Cole, he removed it from his duffel bag and read it once more before the ferry landed. The story of *The Door in the Floor* **would** never **be** a favorite of Ruth's; her father had not told it to her, and it **would be** a few years before Ruth was old enough to read it for herself. She **would hate** it. (p. 47; boldface added).



Another piece of narration in which we find an abundance of examples with past future *would* is *The Sunday Following Mother's Day* by Edward P. Jones<sup>11</sup>:

- (12) As far as anyone could ever tell, the two-minute-or-so conversation he had with Maddie was all he **would** ever **say** in life about the murder of a woman the whole world believed he loved – give or take this or that – more than anything. After that, the most Samuel **would** ever **say** to anyone about it, including his own attorney, was that he was the one. (p. 117; boldface added)
- (13) “Mr. Carlson, it’s obvious you cannot structure a defense for a man who does not want to be defended,” the judge assigned to the case [...] said at one point to the attorney assigned to defend Samuel. That was but one of the sentences in the transcript of the trial that Madeleine Williams **would come** to memorize. (pp. 117-8; boldface added)
- (14) Madeleine, as she was used to doing, tweaked her father’s nose as Maddie was ushering the children to the front door. This was how her years of nightmares **would begin**, the nightmares that **would keep** her sleeping in Maddie’s bed until she was eleven. (p. 119; boldface added)

Examples (10) to (14) give us some evidence that the occurrence of past future *would* in narration is not particularly rare or formal, but it could still be objected that they are all clearly part of strictly literary texts. However, past future *would* is found also in non-literary texts:

- (15) As I left, [the ex-king] said he would see me at the prize giving the following night. **See him I certainly would.** A frisson of excitement ran through the waterfront that afternoon when it was realised that the ex-King was part of the winning crew of the Tilos-Symi leg and would be called up to the stage by the Minister of the Aegean, Aristoteles Pavilides<sup>12</sup>.
- (16) Easter Island’s little civilization was one of the last to develop independently. The earliest of all was Sumer, in what is now southern Iraq. The Sumerians, whose own ethnic and linguistic stock is unclear, set a pattern that Semitic cultures and others in the Old World **would follow**. They came to exemplify both the best and worst of the civilized life [...] <sup>13</sup>.

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11 From the collection *Lost in the City*, Amistad 2003. I am grateful to Cindie Aaen Maagaard for drawing my attention to this work in connection with my project on past future *would*.

12 English journalist writing for *The Symi Visitor*, Issue 97, September 2005, p. 2; boldface added. In the example there are also two cases of past future *would* used in projected clauses: *would see and would be called up*. These cases are not relevant for my argument at this point, but see section 2.2 above.

13 Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, The Text Publishing Company, p. 65; boldface added.

In example (15) a journalist reports on a real past conversation with ex-King Constantin of Greece, using past tense forms, and goes on to refer to another real past event which took place the following day, using past future *would*. Similarly, in example (16) Ronald Wright provides his readers with an historical account of very real events where the main focus is on the Sumerians but with a reference also to later developments. Both examples are narrative in the sense that there is an emphasis on the sequential aspect of interrelated events, but they are certainly not literary in any sense.

Another interesting point in connection with the categorical status of *would* is that the function of looking ahead so characteristic of this form in narration is found also in connection with its present counterpart *will*:

(17) What is happening upstairs is something Howard **will hear** about later<sup>14</sup>.

(18) ‘Do you like gardening?’ John Law asks, the unforeseen question catching her by surprise. She shrugs automatically.

‘I like gardens.’

He laughs, perhaps at her expense, but not as if the joke is unkind. Later she **will regret** not having laughed with him. ‘Not quite the same thing’<sup>15</sup>.

The texts from which these examples are extracted are largely written in the present tense. Like the past tense forms in the other examples looked at so far, the present tense forms in (17) and (18) contribute to the formation of the storyline and the reader is still mentally present, in fact perhaps even more so than in past-tense narration. The difference between the two tenses in narration is a stylistic one, not one of temporal or even narrative orientation: the present tense forms convey a higher degree of immediacy and make the narration slightly more dramatic. However, as the text unfolds, this stylistic effect weakens and the use of the present tense becomes less marked. Used consistently throughout a long narrative text there is hardly any difference between the two tense strategies<sup>16</sup>. The interesting point in connection with examples (17) and (18) is that present future *will* is used in exactly the same way as past future *would* in examples like (10) to (16): viz. to point forward in the storyline. Curiously, Halliday and Matthiessen accept *will* as a tense form, but not *would*. I believe the evidence is very much in favour of accepting both forms as tense forms.

What are the finer implications of the use of past future *would* in narration? Let us consider some of the many examples in *The Sunday Following Mother’s Day*, from which

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14 Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man*, Arrow, p. 93; boldface added.

15 Tobias Hill, *The Cryptographer*, Faber and Faber, p. 45; boldface added.

16 The difference between the two tenses is more perceptible when a largely past-tense narration suddenly shifts to the present tense, which is not an uncommon stylistic device.

short story examples (12) to (14) above were extracted. This sad story begins with the horrible murder of Agnes by her husband Samuel and then follows their two children, Madeleine and Sam (also called Pookie), as they grow up with Samuel's sister Maddie and eventually establish their own families while Samuel is in prison. The story ends on the Sunday following Mother's Day more than twenty years later, when the newly released Samuel unexpectedly shows up on Madeleine's doorstep and offers to give her a lift to see her retarded son, his grandson, also called Sam, at a children's center. The story thus spans some twenty odd years from the murder till Samuel and Madeleine's return from their Sunday excursion, and the narration develops in a largely chronological manner. However, especially in the first part of the plot, past future *would* is used extensively to point forward to the later stages of the narration<sup>17</sup>. What is the narrative effect of this?

Well, first of all it is important to note that, given the fact that past future *would* entails the actualization of the process referred to, it can often be replaced with a {+past (-future)} tense with little difference in meaning; cf. the following variants of examples (12) to (14) above:

- (12a) As far as anyone could ever tell, the two-minute-or-so conversation he had with Maddie was all he ever **said** in life about the murder of a woman the whole world believed he loved – give or take this or that – more than anything. After that, the most Samuel ever **said** to anyone about it, including his own attorney, was that he was the one. (p. 117; past future replaced by boldfaced simple past)
- (13a) “Mr. Carlson, it's obvious you cannot structure a defense for a man who does not want to be defended,” the judge assigned to the case [...] said at one point to the attorney assigned to defend Samuel. That was but one of the sentences in the transcript of the trial that Madeleine Williams **came** to memorize. (pp. 117-8, past future replaced by boldfaced simple past)
- (14a) Madeleine, as she was used to doing, tweaked her father's nose as Maddie was ushering the children to the front door. This was how her years of nightmares **began**, the nightmares that **kept** her sleeping in Maddie's bed until she was eleven. (p. 119; past future replaced by boldfaced simple past)

The effect of replacing past future *would* with the simple past tense, as in examples (12a) to (14a), is a blurring of the reader's sense of a temporal contrast between the narrative zero-

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17 We also find a large number of examples with *would* used with a habitual meaning (to describe a characteristic process or a person's propensity towards a certain kind of process), as in *Sunday became the only day off from researching the Why, and after visiting their son, Madeleine and Curtis would spend the rest of the day at Maddie's or go off to a play or movie and restaurant* (p. 128).

point and the processes further ahead in the narration. In these examples, the narrative zero-point leaps forward with the simple past tense presentation of these later processes, whereas in the original examples (12) to (14) with past future *would*, it remains where it is and thus retains the point already reached in the storyline as a vantage point for looking ahead. There is thus in these examples a more acute sense of temporal perspective in the narration.

We often encounter leaps forward in narration without a shift from past tense to past future tense, as in the following example, where no replacement has taken place:

- (19) And to Maddie, Pookie said that if Jesus could throw the men out of the temple at twelve, he could go down to Lorton or not go down to Lorton. “Pookie actin up,” Madeleine told her father during the next visit. “What did he say to that?” Madeleine **asked** her aunt years later as she **held** her sleeping son on her lap. “I don’t remember,” Maddie **said**. (p. 122; boldface added)

The right temporal location of the posterior processes of ‘asking’, ‘holding’ and ‘saying’ is here ensured by means of the adverbial *years later*<sup>18</sup>. The effect of using the past tense *asked* instead of past future *would ask* is the same as in the replacement examples (12a) to (15a): the narrative zero-point itself leaps forward instead of staying put to provide a basis for an explicit temporal contrast and perspective.

Sometimes the narrator will instruct the reader to look forward to a later process in the storyline by means of a past future (thus retaining a sense of contrast) and then establish the future point as a basis for a small sequence of processes – a small narrative within the narrative. The following is an interesting example of this mechanism:

- (20) Maddie **was standing** in the doorway. The front of Agnes’s nightgown **was soaked** through with blood. “He said to me on the phone, ‘I stabbed her a lot.’” These words her niece, Madeleine, **would find** on page twenty-eight of the \$75.86 copy of the trial transcript. The day she **bought** it – some twenty years after that morning – Madeleine **made** it all the way home before she **discovered** that her copy was missing pages forty-five through fifty-two. It **would be** three weeks before the court clerk could produce the missing pages, and on those pages there **were** no sentences that Madeleine **would come** to memorize. (p. 118; boldface added)

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18 A similar mechanism is often found in leaps backwards in the storyline, where the past is often used instead of the more explicit past perfect: again the difference is one of backgrounding versus foregrounding a temporal perspective.

In this example *would find* points to a process some 20 years ahead of the narrative zero-point, the point reached in the storyline by means of *was standing* and *was soaked*. Once the process of ‘finding’ has been established at this future point, a small digression from the main storyline sets in with the reference to Madeleine buying the trial transcript, making it home and discovering the missing pages, all three processes expressed by means of simple past tense forms (*bought – made – discovered*). This small complex of processes shifts the narrative zero-point from the scene of the crime and creates a new basis for temporal orientation and perspective (supported by the adverbial *some twenty years after that morning*): *would be* thus instructs the reader to look forward yet again, this time from the point at which Madeleine *bought, made* and *discovered*, and once more a new zero-point is created (*were*) from which the reader is invited to look forward (*would come*).

But why does the narrator create these complex temporal perspectives? Well, interestingly enough, past future *would* is used extensively in the first part of the short story, which deals with the crime and the circumstances arising from it, but much more sparingly in the rest of the story. By pointing to the future – i.e. the events taking place in the last part of the short story – the narrator not only gives the reader an indication of what happens later on in the storyline and of the overall temporal span of the plot but creates a dimension which reflects back on the early stages. By retaining an explicit contrast between the narrative zero-point and the future processes referred to, past future *would* offers temporal depth, a perspective which facilitates this reflection. Thus while the past tense narration establishes the main part of the early storyline, the past future constructions add substantially to this part of the storyline by expressing future conversations, formal records (court transcripts, newspaper reports) and memories of the murder and the events immediately following. This retrospective function of past future *would* is clearest in cases where the process referred to, strictly speaking, does not take place ahead of the point reached in the storyline but only gets its significance when viewed from a future perspective as marking the beginning of a future period, as in the following example:

(21) In the next room, Maddie found the children, still asleep, and it was only then that she began to cry. She backed out of the room, went to her brother, and stood over him. “Say somethin to me,” she hissed. She waited, and then she kicked him as hard as she could in his side, and the force of the kick sent the telephone sliding off his lap. It was the last time in their lives she **would** ever **touch** him. Samuel raised his fist to her and kept it raised until she backed off. (pp. 118-9; boldface added)

Here the process of 'touching' in fact takes place right there at the point reached, but it is qualified from a future perspective as being the last 'touch' in a period extending into the future and thus gains special significance. The same point applies to the first instance of *would say* in example (12) and *would begin* in example (14).

## CONCLUSION

There are several good reasons for accepting *would* as a past future marker in the English tense system. Although it may seem deficient in not normally being used to refer to past future processes relative to the moment of communication, it serves a variety of functions for which tense forms more generally are recruited. Thus we can only describe regular variation in verb forms in the projection of thought and speech and the stipulation of conditions as a category-internal phenomenon if *would* is part of the tense system. The same applies to narration, where unproblematic tense markers, as well as *would*, are used for temporal orientation of processes. In most standard comprehensive grammars of English, past future *would* in narration is described as 'rare', 'formal' and 'literary'. The evidence, as well as the analysis of the data provided in this paper, suggests otherwise: past future *would* serves a well-defined purpose within the system of temporal orientation and supports specific compositional strategies. The central integration of past future *would* in the English tense system is a point in favour of the model proposed by Bache and Davidsen-Nielsen 1997.

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