On the Meaning(s) of *After* in Varieties of Scottish English[*]

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Abstract

Basic spatial and temporal meanings of the preposition *after* in Standard American English and Highland Scottish English are accounted for in this proposed semantics of the preposition. In addition, two seemingly aberrant meanings in Highland Scottish English and Lowlands Scots/ Lowlands Scottish English are discussed; the proposed semantics accounts for these meanings as well. The meaning of *after* is related to the meanings of *first* and *subsequent*, which are given definitions in terms of points of reference.

1   Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present a preliminary semantics of temporal and spatial interpretations of *after* in English that can account for basic meanings in Standard American English and Highland Scottish English, as well as two seemingly deviant meanings in Highland Scottish English and Lowlands Scots/Lowlands Scottish English. The basic claims

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are as follows:

1. *Y (is) after x* in each variety has an invariant semantics (at least for the uses considered here) meaning (generally) 'x is first, y is subsequent'.
   - The notion of *first*, however, is relative. *First* means 'closest to a contextually determined standard point of reference', and *subsequent* means 'farther from that point of reference along a contextually determined standard path'.
2. The variation seen in the possible interpretations of *after*, including the seemingly deviant meanings, can be accounted for by incorporating the standard reference points for temporal and spatial expressions in English into our understanding of the semantics of the word, and by recognizing variation on these standard points in some varieties.

In this paper I discuss varieties I will call Standard American English (SAE), Highland Scottish English (HSE), (Highland/Island) Scottish Gaelic (SG), Scots, and Lowlands Scots/Lowlands Scottish English (LS/LSE). Highland Scottish English refers to the (generalized) variety of Scottish English spoken in the Highlands and Western Islands (specifically Skye, but likely generalizable to the rest of the Hebrides; not assumed to be generalized to the Orkney and Shetland islands in the north). Highland Scottish English is generally spoken by those who also have Scottish Gaelic (Gàidhlig), or whose family members or neighbors do or did. There is a greater influence of Scottish Gaelic on this variety than on some other varieties of Scottish English, in terms of both phonology and grammar.

When I discuss Scottish Gaelic, I am specifically referring to the language as it is spoken on the Isle of Skye; this will be quite similar (though not identical) to the Scottish Gaelic spoken in the Hebrides and the Highlands (and these are the areas where the most Gaelic is spoken). I make no claims about Scottish Gaelic spoken in the Lowlands or the Uplands.

By 'Scots' I mean the Scots language/dialect in general, regardless of region. Scots is spoken primarily in the Lowlands, and also on Shetland and in Ulster. Scots is a West Germanic dialect or language, originating from Northumbrian Old English (see e.g. McClure 1994, Crystal 1995 for differing opinions on the status of Scots as a language). In general,

speakers of Scots have command of some variation on Standard Scottish English; depending on the region and the speaker, the two varieties might be spoken in a continuum by the same speaker, or code-switched between. The data from Scots included here are culled from various works/corpora included in dictionaries of Scots. Several regions and varieties are represented in these citations, and as such we will take the data to be representative of 'General Scots', and not of any one particular variety (but they are not specific to Shetlandic or Ulster Scots). Finally, one data point is from a Lowlands speaker of Scots and English; it is not clear whether this point originates in the speaker's Scots or her English, or both.

2   Some Basic (Relevant) Meanings of *After*

The basic meanings of *after* in English can be broken into two major categories: something can be 'after' something else in space, or in time. These categories will not end up being theoretically distinct in terms of the relational meaning of *after* (which remains one of subsequence), but rather in terms of what the standard reference points are (and also in the specifics of the formal representations). And, in fact, these will both end up being spatial notions for us, since our theorizing about time will depend on the notion of a timeline.

2.1   After in Space

2.1.1 Literal Space

After in SAE can be used to describe the ordering or position of two objects or individuals in space.

SAE
(1)   Jeff is *after* Megan in line.
(2)   The grey book is *after* the white book on the shelf.
(3)   The provosts walked *after* the students in the procession.

Highland Scottish English allows the same. Even in more idiomatic expressions, *after* seems to be contributing somewhat literal spatial meaning. For example, *go after/run after*

'chase/pursue by quick movement or running [possibly with the first individual having a head start]':

SAE

(4)   The puppy *ran after* the hedgehog.

HSE/SAE

(5)   He took my wallet! *Go after* him!

In these cases, there is still a spatial subsequence at play; in the puppy's pursuing of the hedgehog the puppy is still behind/after the hedgehog (as he would be if they were in line). Compare this to a non-idiomatic, spatial use of *go after*:

(6)   When we line up for pictures, Jelena will go on the far left, Jessamyn will go *after* her, and Alex will go *after* her.

2.1.2 Figurative? Space

After can also take part in more figuratively spatial relationships. For instance, analogous to (2) above, we might talk of items in a list coming after each other, regardless of whether that list is currently in physical form or not.

(7)   The letter 'd' comes *after* the letter 'a' in the alphabet.

Perhaps analogous to the series in (4) and (5) above is the expression *be after* 'seek/look for/ "get at"'; that is, metaphorical pursuit:

SAE/HSE

(8)   You keep asking about my taxes. What *are* you *after*, anyway?

2.2   After in Time

After can also relate two times or events:

SAE/HSE

(9)   It's (currently) *after* 9 p.m.

(10)   Diane left *after* Mike arrived.

Of course, time and space are often not independent of each other; so in the example below we have a primarily temporal proposition (John ran, and then Shelley did), but one that also results in Shelley being 'after' John in space (unless he loops around the course to end up back at the beginning before Shelley starts to run).

SAE

(11)   Shelley ran *after* John (did) in the 5k.

3   The Semantics of *After* in SAE and HSE

We can arrive at one semantics for both spatial and temporal meanings of *after*. First let's examine the meanings themselves. It might help to represent the different interpretations visually. Take the following figure:

Figure 1: Unlabeled dots diagram

Presented with this figure, a convenience sample of naïve literate native speakers of SAE overwhelmingly report that the grey dot is *after* the white dot. If pressed for reasoning, they tend to cite the left-to-right direction of reading in English. This also seems the most natural

interpretation of the set-up of the books described in (2) above: *The grey book is after the white book on the shelf.* This left-to-right direction of course also applies to time or events on a timeline, as commonly construed:
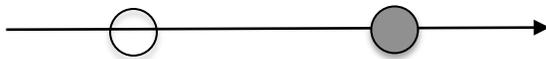
Figure 2: Timeline

past   a   b   *future*

'b is *after* a'
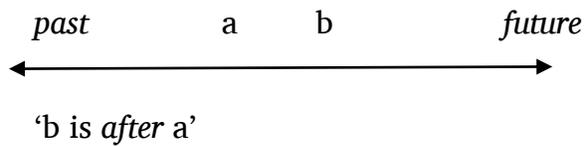
However, given the correct context, such a group of speakers will report the opposite:

Figure 3: Dots with context
Context: "This is an aerial view of two people walking in the direction of the arrow."

Report: The person in white is walking *after* the person in grey.

The report is the same if we conceive of figure 3 as a line of people facing in the direction of the arrow. We can recreate this in the vertical direction, as well:

Figure 4: Unlabeled vs. arrowed vertical dot diagram

In the diagram on the left, the grey dot is reported as being after the white one; in the

diagram on the right, the opposite report is given.

At least in visual representation, then, the member of a pair that is taken to be after the other member clearly depends on one's perspective. Specifically, it depends on where we take the reference point to be: the front of the line, the "first" book, etc. (We can easily imagine someone stacking books from right to left on a shelf, and having the rightmost book be considered 'first'.) Clearly, this mirrors the relativity of such phenomena: without knowing which end of a line is the "front", we can't know who's first in line. Once we know where the front of the line is, we know who is first in line: the person who is closest to the front. Library of Congress organizational standards (for instance) require that books be organized from left to right—so the far left will be the reference point, and the book closest to that point is the first book on the shelf. New reference points easily create new "fronts".

So, we can establish what *after* means, at least spatially:

- *'x after y' means y is closest to a standard reference point, and x is farther away from that reference point.*

But what of the timeline? If we are thinking of the past on the left and the future on the right, what is the reference point? Consider the following statements:

SAE

(12)   9 p.m. is *after* 7 p.m.

(13)   October 2012 is *after* November 2011.

We seem to be using the beginning of the timeline (so, the beginning of the calendar; or, the beginning of time) as our reference point. We can use the same definition of *after*, then, for time, with the understanding that we are talking about times that are temporally closer or farther away, rather than individuals spatially closer or farther away. (When using themselves as reference points, of course, speakers of (all varieties of?) English locate the past behind them and the future in front—and so we have *2001 is behind us now*, etc.)

As with the timeline, examples in which the figures are moving don't necessarily have a pre-established reference point the way a line of people does. (A race does: the finish line.)

However, we can reckon who (or what) is 'first' in a similar fashion:

- *given a direction (of movement) toward an arbitrary but stationary point, the participant closest to that point is 'first'. OR*
- *given a direction (of movement), the participant farthest in that direction is 'first'.*

Our more figurative spatial uses of *after* can be understood in the same way. Both literal and metaphorical (or physical and intellectual) pursuit (*run/go after* and *be after*) have a direction, either real or imagined; importantly, in both cases the direction is away from the pursuer— thus the pursued will always be farther in the direction of pursuit.

4 Possible Problem #1 (and Solution)

In HSE we see *after* in another place:

HSE

(14)   I'm after going down to the shop.
       'I have just gone down to the shop.'

Here, *after* is relaying aspectual information. Is this just an instance of *after* relating times? The proposition is 'I have recently gone', not 'I am in the time that is after shop-going', after all.   In fact, this latter gloss is the meaning of the perfect I advocate in Reed (2012). This construction is a calque on the Scottish Gaelic recent/restricted perfect with *as dèidh/an dèidh* ('after' when used as a preposition; hence the terminology 'after-perfect' for this and the parallel construction in Irish (e.g. Ó Sé 2004)). This construction is seen in (15):

SG

(15)   *Tha   Alexandra   as dèidh   Alba   a   ruigsinn.*
       be.PRES   Alexandra   AS DÈIDH   Scotland   AGRO   reach/arrive.VN
       'Alexandra has just arrived in Scotland.'
       (Reed 2012, p. 75, ex. 77)

This and other aspect-marking (former) prepositions in SG convey different relations between assertion/reference time (RT) and event time (ET); they correspond to a decent degree to the prepositions we would express these relations with in English. See Demirdache & Uribe-Etxebarria (1997 and forward) for a theory of the syntax of tense and aspect in which prepositional relations define the different tenses and aspects.

Figure 5: Perfect aspect

If we believe Neo-Reichenbachian accounts of grammatical aspect (e.g. Hornstein 1990; Higginbotham 2009; Klein 1992, 1994; Demirdache & Uribe-Etxebarria 1997 and forward), which take its contribution to be to locate assertion/reference/topic time with respect to event/situation time, we can understand this calqued construction in terms of reference points again. In the HSE construction, I claim, *after* is spelling out the relationship between the assertion/reference time and the event time (going-to-the-shop time); the assertion/reference time is determined by the tense of the verb 'be'. Recall our previous definition:

- *'x after y' means y is closest to a standard reference point, and x is farther away from that reference point.*

Now, *y* is the event time, and *x* is the assertion/reference time; but we need a 'standard reference point'. We could propose that this interpretation is a timeline interpretation: that the beginning of (the) time(line) is the reference point. However, we are not talking about the instantiations of assertion/reference or event times, but the categories themselves. Recall our second formulation of *first* when determining arbitrary reference points:

- *given a direction (of movement), the participant farthest in that direction is 'first'.*

Let's revise this:

- *given an **orientation in a particular direction,** the participant farthest in that direction is 'first'.*

If aspect establishes assertion/reference time with respect to event time, then we can think of it as orienting in the direction of event time; event time is then the furthest in that direction, and reference time comes after.

5   Possible Problem #2 (and Solution)

We also have preliminary evidence of a somewhat puzzling meaning for the same construction, in LSE/Lowlands Scots:[1]

LSE/Lowlands Scots speaker report
(16)   I'm after going down to the shop.
'I'm about to go down to the shop.'
(Andrew Carnie, p.c.)

It seems as if this meaning is the "opposite" of the HSE meaning: now, we're making an assertion about the present, with respect to an event in the future: it seems that assertion/reference time is *before* rather than *after* event time (making it a prospective aspectual meaning).

Efter in General Scots (sometimes 'after', 'aifter') is indeed used in the more standard ways *after* is in SAE/HSE (in addition to simple locational and temporal uses):

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[1] Also possibly in some English varieties in Newfoundland (Heidi Harley, p.c.).

Scots

Temporal

(17)   I had to tell everyone at the casualty that I was mucking aboot wi Tony and I fell. I
        had headaches for a long time eftir that.
        (Edinburgh; Irvine Welsh *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1996) 23; taken from *Scottish
        National Dictionary*)

        'Be after'

(18)   What are ye efter?
        'What do you want [to drink]?'
        (Edinburgh, 1994, quoted in *Scottish National Dictionary*)

In at least some varieties of Scots (in Scottish Gaelic-influenced areas), *efter* can also function
as *after* does in HSE:

Scots

(19)   Dae ye ken whut he's jist efter tellin' me.
        'Do you know what he's just told me'
        (Argyll; L. McInnes *Dial. S. Kintyre* (1937) 16; taken from *Scottish National Dictionary*)

(20)   Ah'm just after being tae the doctor's.
        'I've just been to the doctor's.'
        (Glasgow; Michael Munro *The Patter* (1985) 6; taken from *Scottish National Dictionary*)

        The question arises as to how we could we reconcile this "opposite" meaning in (16)
within the present schema. Interestingly, this example seems to group with the spatial or
'pursuit' examples. Consider our definition of 'first' again, with the modification for
understanding the aspectual relation:

- *given an **orientation in a particular direction,** the participant farthest in that direction is 'first'.*

This definition easily allows for a possible 'about to' meaning: the event is still in the future, so our orientation is in that direction. The event time is farthest in that direction, and the reference time is farther away, making it 'after' event time.

6   Conclusion

We now have a semantics for *after* that can allows for both spatial and temporal interpretations, as well as aspectual ones:

- *Y (is) after x* means 'x is first, y is subsequent' ($x < y$).

- *First* means 'closest to a contextually determined standard point of reference', and *subsequent* means 'farther from that point of reference along a contextually determined standard path'.

To determine a point of reference, given an orientation in a particular direction, the participant farthest in that direction (at the farthest point along that vector) is 'first'. This definition predicts the similarities between spatial and temporal uses of the preposition. The addition of the determination of the point of reference allows us to account for literal and metaphorical spatial or temporal interpretations, as well as the aspectual ones found in Scottish English.

Appendix: Possible Formalizations

Several possible formalizations exist at least for temporal interpretations of *after* in English; for instance:

(A1)   'S after *z*' = $(\exists t)_{t>z}AT(S,t)$

   (König 1974)

(A2) $[_{tP}after] = \lambda\mathcal{P}\,\lambda P\,\lambda I\,[(\lambda y_0[P(time\text{-}from(I, time(y_0)))], I)]$

   (where *I* is the interval of evaluation)

   (Pratt & Francez 2001)

These are easily modified for space/individuals rather than time, but the point of reference is not included.

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