Tense usage of verbs of uttering and communication—proper, or ‘primary’ reporting verbs ((a) say, negate; (b) predict, inquire, promise, urge, …) as well as ‘secondary’ ones, such as (a) those capable of non-verbally indicating states of mind and emotive attitudes (foresee, wonder, be indignant at, acquiesce to, …); (b) verbs of manner of speaking and sound production (repeat; murmur, laugh, blurt out, …), and (c) even more far-fetched lexemes, that convey or imply bodily movement (nod, wave, flare up, …), has always struck me as unruly or at any rate as a departure from regular verb behavior of the diction at issue.

Languages vary in respect of this deviant, lexical-class specific tense behavior, as two random examples may illustrate:

In Modern French, and in other Romance languages, the extensive presence of the *imparfait de narration* with all its ramifications—much more extensive than in the mother-language—somewhat obscures the large share of *verba dicendi* in this constellation. In fact the proliferation of the imperfect of speech-act verbs in narrative discourse is less conspicuous in earlier stages, where—despite much fluctuation even in contemporaneous corpora, as the Appendix in Fleischman (1990: 317–371) demonstrates—Old and Middle French *verba dicendi* most commonly take on constative preterite tense forms when framing direct speech.2

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1 To borrow Fónagy’s felicitous term à propos his classification (1986: 264–272) of French and Hungarian direct-speech framing verbs. It was Behaghel in his historical German syntax (1928: 697–699) and prior to that in 1877, who first presented the wide variety of such secondary verbs, while Kieckers (1916: 45–51) had singled out the verba affectuum in this role. Both Behaghel and Fónagy underline the literary character of such usage of verbs which, while functioning as direct-speech frames, are in their central semantic domain far afield from such denotation and make up an open list in any living language.

2 Notwithstanding the painstakingly elaborate deliberations in Fleischman (1990: 72–74, 78–81, 82) about the aspectual status of the present tense, a regular framing form, ranging it as imperfective cannot be upheld: aspectually it is unmarked.
From Ancient Greek one can easily exemplify bizarre occurrence of the imperfect in foreground narrative context, and that repeatedly where verba dicendi and related verbs are involved. There is no point in adducing here even part of the vast literature on this subject; this imperfect is all-pervading, attested in contexts “where modern Sprachgefühl would expect the aorist” (Schwyzer and Debrunner 1950: 277). As for Homeric Greek, regardless of a certain inclination towards the aorist in opening and capping formulas (Fournier 1946: 63)—which I can associate with the use of the aorist in other states of affairs identified as typical (Schwyzer and Debrunner 1950: 283–284)—distinguishing between the (admittedly more common) aorist and the imperfect of verba dicendi in such formulas has not made much progress, but one hates to go along with Fournier who claims (1946: 61) a total jumble of these tenses (“Les verbes dire ont … la valeur dépouillée d’aspect …”). For later stages, one has to concede with Fanning, in his outstanding critical survey of verbs of sending, commanding, asking, and speaking (1990: 282–290), that above and beyond a number of distinctions—and, may I add, at times conflicting ones—distribution is primarily subject to individual stylistic preferences and idiosyncrasies.

1. An Imperfect of Recall?

For Latin the perceptible participation of verbs of saying, neutral ones and specific ones alike, in ‘unwanted’ imperfect forms\(^3\) was often noted. From among studies focussing on this tense, a few sober, if not resolving accounts, such as Petersmann’s (1977: 174–175), stand out, beside ad hoc interpretations and non-generalizable statements, at times laboring under psychologistic explications (Mellet 1988). Early Latin usage (for which Wheeler 1903 is still a good source) is a matter apart: while indeed in the Comic dialogue imperfect verba dicendi do often take up an antecedent utterance (Mellet 1988: 132–135), the bulk of these imperfects is made up of ai(e)ba-, which in the absence of other preterite forms has—pace Mellet (1987; 1988: 246–247)—neither grammatical nor pragmatic significance.

In Latin scholarship much significance is attached in this context to the intervention of the speaker/ writer’s or the addressee’s memory and men-

\(^3\) Lexemes of the same semantic field prominently figure likewise in the inventory of historic infinitives in Classical narrative prose (Dressler 1968: 131, 144; Viljaama 1983:...