

## The expression *before/after the fact*

*Before/after the fact* is used either as an adverbial (1) or a pre- or postnominal modifier (see (2); cf. *after-the-fact approval*).

- (1) That sixteen senators and congressmen were told about the strikes *after the fact* is not sufficient and does not equal informing “Congress”, much less the public.
- (2) Imaging History: Photography *After the Fact* (book title)  
[What is the importance of place, particularly the place that remains after the event took place? How do photographers or artists use photography to depict the past, when time has become ‘past time’?]

Claims this study makes:

1. *After the fact* describes a temporal relation between events, and *the fact* refers to an event (instead of an ontological fact).
2. *The fact* is anaphoric due to its lack of descriptive content. As a definite description, *the fact* needs no salient referent and can refer through bridging.
3. *The fact* resembles a weak definite (Aguilar-Guevara & Oggiani 2023).

## *The fact* is not an ontological fact

While a fact is an abstract object that cannot be located in time (Vendler 1967), *the fact* occurs with temporal prepositions (3a) including *during* (4), and is incompatible with a CP complement (3b):

- (3) a. Thirty years *after the fact*, the Toledo Blade’s series tells the story of atrocities committed by “Tiger Force”, an elite American fighter unit in Vietnam.  
b. #Thirty years *after the fact* that “Tiger Force” committed atrocities...
- (4) Even if he was able to figure it out *after or during the fact*, he got no direct confirmation of it before he died.

**Not always factive:** *Fact* can be modified by adjectives like *alleged*, *putative* and *disputable*.

- (5) That tale was originally told 93 years *after the alleged fact* – by her grandson.

## Antecedent

*The fact* is anaphoric: It lacks descriptive content and needs an antecedent to be interpreted. The antecedent must be eventive: (6c) does not follow (6a) or (6b).

- (6) a. Mary told Bill [a fact]<sub>i</sub>.  
b. Mary loved [the fact that Bill came early]<sub>i</sub>.  
c. #She hugged him after [the fact]<sub>i</sub>.

The antecedent can be an event in the previous discourse:

- (7) On the night of January 5, 2000, a moving van pulled up quietly in front of Pacifica’s Berkeley headquarters and moved its contents to Washington, DC. A Pacifica press release issued *after the fact* explained “The move allows the national staff easier access [...]”

More commonly, the antecedent is an eventive NP, see (1) above.

## Coreferential or not?

Does *the fact* in (1) refer to the eventive NP *the strikes* directly (8a), or to an inferred event (8b)?

- (8) The senators were only told about the strikes<sub>i</sub>...  
a. after the strikes<sub>i</sub>.  
[During *the fact* is only compatible with this interpretation.]  
b. after the strikes<sub>i</sub> occurred/started/finished.  
[This interpretation allows for underspecification of the inferred event.]

*The fact* also refers through bridging:

- (9) Plans do no good when they are made *after the fact*.
- (10) accessory *before/after the fact* (legal term)

*Fact* is neither a relational noun nor stands in a part-whole relation to the antecedent: #*the fact of the plans*, #*the plans’ fact*.

The antecedent does not have to lexically encode an event. The referent is inferred through lexical/world knowledge: Plans are normally made for future events. This predicts that the antecedent must be able to provide an eventive referent through bridging:

- (11) #[Out of the blue] John fed the elephant *after the fact*.

## Presupposition

Unlike pronouns or *afterwards*, *after the fact* is not always possible even with a salient event antecedent:

- (12) a. John ate breakfast. He went to the supermarket after that/afterwards/#*after the fact*.  
[Only temporal relation between eating breakfast and going to the supermarket.]  
b. John broke into the museum. He cleaned up his traces *after the fact*.  
[Traces were likely left during the intrusion, which justifies the cleaning up.]

**Presupposition:** The events in the temporal relation contributed by *before/after the fact* must also be relevant in other ways.

## Similarity to weak definites

*The fact* in *before/after the fact* is similar to weak definites, such as the definite NPs in *read the newspaper*, *go to the hospital*, etc.

**Lexically constrained:** This reading of *the fact* only occurs as complement of temporal prepositions; substituting *event*, *situation* etc. for *fact* is not always plausible.

**Restricted in number morphology and determiner:** The enTenTen21 corpus contains over 80,000 cases of *after the fact*, but less than 100 instances of *after a fact/ the facts/this fact*.

**Narrow scope and non-unique reference:** *The fact* has a quantifier-dependent interpretation, as seen in *Every time there is a strike, the senators are informed after the fact*.

**Low anaphoricity:** *The fact* does not introduce new referents: It is impossible to continue the discourse with *the fact* in (9).

The difference is, *the fact* is referential and anaphoric.

## References

Aguilar-Guevara, A., & Oggiani, C. (2023). Weak definite nominals. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 17(6), e12503. || Vendler, Z. (1967). *Linguistics in philosophy*. Cornell University Press.

All examples, if not specifically marked, are from enTenTen21.