I. INTRODUCTION

Since the early part of this century there has been a considerable amount of discussion of the question 'Does time pass?'. A useful way of approaching the debate over the passage of time is to consider the following thesis:

The space-time thesis (SPT): Time is similar to the dimensions of space in at least this one respect: there are no properties possessed by time, but not possessed by any dimension of space, in virtue of which it is true to say that time passes.

Those who say that time does not pass generally want to affirm something like SPT. Those, on the other hand, who say that time does pass generally want to deny SPT.

Of course, SPT is, as it stands, a mere skeleton of a thesis that needs to be fleshed out. What kind of properties could be relevant here? Why exactly would it be that in virtue of time's possession of these properties it is true to say that time passes? What exactly would it mean to say that time passes? These are all matters that require considerable discussion.

The aim of this paper, however, is to consider some linguistic issues that have been thought to be central to the debate over the passage of time. Many of the writers who have taken up the issue of whether or not time passess have begun their discussions by focusing on linguistic matters. This is true both of such non-passage theorists as Goodman, Quine, Smart and Mellor, and of such passage theorists as Prior, Gale, Schlesinger and Smith. The general idea that each of these people has entertained, some of them with more conviction than others, is that the metaphysical issues involved in the question of whether or
not time passes — including, especially, questions that stem from a consideration of SPT — can all be settled simply by settling the relevant linguistic issues. Consequently, these writers have turned, in some cases almost immediately, from discussions of those metaphysical issues to discussions of linguistic matters.

At the center of the linguistic issues involved here is the undisputed fact that in our ordinary language (which is to say, for our purposes, in English), time is accorded a special status that no dimension of space enjoys. We have numerous tense distinctions in English — the past tense, the present tense, the future tense, the past perfect, and so on — but we do not have spatial distinctions along these lines built into our language.

Prima facie, at least, this seems to be a datum that may be used in an argument against SPT. For it may be claimed by the passage theorist that our language is necessarily this way; it could not have been otherwise, and still have provided us with the means for accurately describing all of the objective features of the world that we are in fact able to describe. If our language had been otherwise, the claim may go, if, that is, time had been treated just like space in our ordinary language, then we would not be able to capture in our descriptions of the world all of the objective features of the world that we are in fact able to capture. This can be explained only by the fact that important features of our language correspond to important features of the world; i.e., by the fact that language mirrors reality. Hence, the argument would go, it follows from time’s essentially special status in our language that time also has an essentially special status in reality: time passes.

This somewhat plausible argument may be formulated as follows.

The Linguistic Argument Against SPT

(1) Time’s special treatment in our ordinary language is necessary; time could not be treated in ordinary language in just the way space is, without our thereby losing some of our ability to describe accurately objective features of the world. (Hereafter, this premise will be referred to as “the linguistic thesis of passage,” or “LP.”)
(2) If (1), then SPT is false.
(3) SPT is false.