DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 527   FL 023 900

AUTHOR   Bardovi-Harlig, Kathleen
TITLE   The Telling of a Tale: Discourse Structure and Tense
                Use in Learners' Narratives.
PUB DATE   92
NOTE   20p.; For complete volume, see FL 023 890.
PUB TYPE   Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Journal
                Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT   Pragmatics and Language Learning; v3 p144-161 1992

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   Discourse Analysis; *English (Second Language);
                Language Patterns; Language Research; Language Usage;
                Linguistic Theory; *Pragmatics; Second Language
                Learning; *Story Telling; *Tenses (Grammar);
                *Verbs

ABSTRACT
         A study investigated the use of verb tense by
learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) from the perspective
of narrative structure. Subjects were 16 adult intermediate-level ESL
learners of varied linguistic backgrounds' and 24 native speakers of
English. All attended an oral telling of a Hawaiian trickster tale,
with a brief introduction, using pictures for some key words and
proper and place names written on a blackboard. The presentation was
also tape-recorded and played back. Each subject then retold the
story to an interviewer and wrote it out in class. Use of verb tense
in the narratives was then analyzed, first by describing tense
distribution and then by examining tense use in context. Results show
that the ESL learners used past tense to mark foreground clauses and
non-past to mark background clauses, unlike native speakers who do
not rely primarily on tense or aspect markers to distinguish
foreground from background. This suggests that ESL learners are
likely to have to abandon this apparently functional and systematic
use of tense in order to produce native-like discourse. (MSE)

The Telling of a Tale:
Discourse Structure and Tense Use in Learners' Narratives

Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig

The Telling of a Tale:
Discourse Structure and Tense Use in Learners' Narratives

Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig

This paper demonstrates that the use of tense by learners of English as a second language can best be understood + ..m the perspective of narrative structure. Sixteen intermediate learners produced an oral and a written narrative by means of a story-retell task. Tense use in each narrative was evaluated by means of the occurrence in obligatory contexts in the narrative as a whole and separately for the background and the foreground of the narrative. The analysis of tense use and discourse structure showed that the majority of the learners used tense to distinguish the foreground from the background, employing simple past tense in the foreground and present and base forms in the background. This study suggests that learners use their somewhat limited linguistic resources to construct narratives to their best advantage by marking the main story line.

Narratives have been used in second language acquisition research as vehicles for the study of tense and aspect. In a narrative discourse "the speaker relates a series of real or fictive events in the order in which they took place" (Dahl, 1984, p. 116). The temporal point of reference of any one event in a narrative context is understood as following the event preceding it. So important is the concept of sequentiality that narrative clauses may be defined by the interpretation of their order: "If a change in the order of the two clauses results in a change in the interpretation of what actually happened, then those two clauses are narrative clauses" (Schiffrin, 1981, p. 47; see also Labov, 1972 and Labov & Valetzky, 1967). The sequential character of narratives provides a context in which it is possible to observe how second language learners use verbal morphology to report chains of events. This paper argues that the narrative is more than a carrier for tense. Understanding the structure of the narrative itself is the key to understanding the use of tense by language learners.

The time reference of every clause in a narrative discourse is not always sequentially ordered, as many linguists have observed. Narrative discourse is comprised of two parts: the foreground and the background. The foreground relates events belonging to the skeletal structure of the discourse (Hopper, 1979) and consists of clauses which move time forward (Dry, 1983). The background does not itself narrate main events, but provides supportive material which elaborates on or evaluates the events in the foreground (Hopper, 1979). The purpose of this paper is to show that the development of tense use in interlanguage cannot be understood apart from the structure of the narrative. Moreover, this study suggests that learners use their somewhat limited linguistic resources to construct their narratives to their

3

best advantage in the same way that Hopper observes that competent (native) users of a language "mark out a main route through the narrative and divert in some way those parts of the narrative which are not strictly relevant to this route" (1979, p.239). For some learners in this study, this is accomplished by marking the majority of the foreground actions with past tense and the majority of the background clauses in nonpast as in the following example from the narrative of an adult intermediate learner of English as a second language.[1]

(1) Foreground   Background

Punia shouted again.

"If you take me to the rock,
I can live. and If you take
me the sandy beach, I'll die
forever."

                                He isn't king, he was stupid

He took Punia to the beech,
so Punia was saved.

                                After all, that Hawaiian people can
                                eat every fish food they want. (L1
                                Korean, Written Narrative)

After a brief review of previous work, we will return to a detailed analysis of tense marking in narratives told by adult learners of English.

PREVIOUS WORK

Crosslinguistic investigations suggest that the distinction between background and foreground may be a universal of narrative discourse (Hopper, 1979). Events reported in foreground clauses are understood to be sequential, but background events are often out of sequence with respect to the foreground and to other background events. For example, a background clause may provide information necessary to the interpretation of an event by revealing a prior event (located before the narrated event on the time line), make a prediction about the outcome of an event (located after the event on the time line), or evaluate an action reported in the foreground (not located on the time line). Hopper observes that "one typically finds an aspect marker specialized for foregrounding, or one specialized for backgrounding, or both functions indicated" (1979, p.239). Tense markers may occur with aspectual markers. Because of its function, the background may exhibit a variety of tenses such as pluperfect, remote past, future-perfect, and future which do not occur in the foreground. In the foreground, Hopper observes, successive events may be marked in the preterite or simple past (1979, p.239). Dahl observes that verbs in the foreground may also carry no marking: "it appears fairly natural that a

large number of languages...[Eskimo, Indonesian, Javanese, Sudanese, Kammu, Thai, Wolof, and Yoruba] use completely unmarked forms in narrative contexts" (1984, p.117).

In her examination of foreground and background in contemporary English literary narratives, Dry (1981, 1983) reported that foreground clauses are usually in the simple past or historical present. As in the foreground, the simple past is also the most prevalent verb form in the background clauses. Tokens of past perfect and progressive aspect also occur in the background. English does not rely primarily on tense or aspect markers to distinguish foreground from background.

Wolfson (1979) and Schiffrin (1981) describe the use of the conversational historical present in spontaneous oral narratives. Schiffrin's detailed analysis of the use of conversational historical present in narratives indicates that native speakers of English switch tense only in the foreground, where Dahl (1984) and Hopper (1979) agree time reference is determined more by the narrative context than by tense itself. Schiffrin's analysis shows that even when tense switching occurs, the simple past seems to be the dominant form (69 % of the verbs in the foreground were in the past).

Studies in second language acquisition have also begun to investigate tense-aspect marking in the narratives of adult learners of English, although they are limited by the number of learners and offer apparently contradictory results (Kumpf, 1984; Flashner, 1989). Kumpf and Flashner found the division of narra-tive discourse into background and foreground revealing for an analysis of tense usage in interlanguage. Kumpf found that a Japanese learner of English used the base form of the verb to express completed action in the foreground. None of the foreground verbs carried tense marking. In the background, many morphologically marked verbs occurred. Stative verbs showed tense while active verbs were marked for habitual and continuous aspect, but were marked irregularly for tense. Kumpf's findings are similar to what Givón (1982) reports for Hawaiian Creole. In contrast, Flashner found that three Russian learners of English marked foreground actions and left background portions unmarked. The foreground verbs occurred predomi-nantly in simple past with the background verbs being in predominantly base forms.

The contradictory findings of these two studies concerning second language acquisition cannot be reconciled on the basis of narratives from four learners. This study builds on the previous studies by increasing the number of learners, including written as well as oral narratives, having the learners tell the same story to ensure comparability of content, and examining the narratives of classroom learners.

METHOD

Sixteen adult learners of English as a second language and twenty-four native speakers participated in this study. The learners were all intermediate level learners (eight low and eight high intermediate) as determined by the placement examination of the Intensive English Program at Indiana University. In each of the low and high intermediate groups there were four speakers of Arabic and one speaker of Spanish. The remaining six were native speakers of Korean, Chinese, and Japanese.[2]

5

The participants attended an oral telling of "Punia and the King of the Sharks," a Hawaiian trickster tale from *Twenty Tellable Tales* by Margaret MacDonald. Learners were given a brief introduction to the story with pictures for the key words *shark, lobster*, and *bay*. Proper names and place names were written on the blackboard. The presentation was taped for playback. Participants heard the story twice: once live and once on tape. Learners retold the story individually to one member of the interview team and then wrote the stories later in their writing classes thereby producing both an oral and a written narrative. This same procedure was followed for the native speakers, but they produced only written narratives.

In the story the hero, a boy named Punia, rids the bay of Kohala of the King of the Sharks and his followers by tricking them. As a result, he restores the use of the bay to the villagers. The tale has two major episodes: the elimination of the sharks from the bay and the final killing of the King of the Sharks. In the first part of the story, Punia tricks the sharks into eliminating one of their group. The story of this trick is told three times in detail and then a summary is given to cover the elimination of the other six sharks. In the second half of the story, Punia takes on, and ultimately kills, the King of the Sharks. Learners were instructed to listen to the story carefully in order to discover how Punia tricked the sharks and saved his village.

The foreground of the narrative was told exclusively in past tense with the exception of the direct speech used to announce the tricks. The background of the story was also told in past tense with three instances of past perfect.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This section describes the use of tense in the narratives in two ways: first by describing the distribution of tense and second, by examining tense use in context.

Tense Use: Overview

In order to determine whether the categories of foreground and background are relevant to interlanguage narratives with respect to tense use, it is necessary to first have a profile of the learners' overall tense use. Then tense use in the foreground and background can be analyzed to determine whether the profiles of the learners change when discourse organization is taken into account.

Each verb in the narratives was coded for its verbal morphology and its context. Only verbs in past-time contexts were included in this analysis. This eliminated comments such as "Now, I'll write this story," and infinitive clauses which carry no tense. Many learners included direct speech in their narratives following the original telling of the story, but only the verbs which introduce the speech such as *say, told*, and *shouted*, were considered to be in a past context. (See also Schiffrin 1981 which codes the tense of the verbs of saying, but not the quotations themselves.)

Verbal morphology was divided into two broad categories, "past" and "nonpast." Tokens of "past" forms consist essentially of simple past forms, but also

include a few instances of past progressive, past perfect, and the "past" modal *could* + verb.[3] The nonpast forms which are represented include base forms such *as go* and *come*, present tense forms, the "present" modal can + verb, and present perfect. We may interpret the use of past morphology in the context of the narrative to be appropriate because both the performed narrative and the native-speaker written versions were exclusively in past tense.[4,5]

Rates of appropriate use

The use of past tense by intermediate learners shows different levels of development in tense use among the individual learners. The use of past tense by the low intermediate group ranges from 31.8% to 60.6% of the finite verbs in oral production and from 30.4% to 89.5% in written production. The range of the past tense use for the high intermediate group is from 15.0% to 90.7% in the oral narratives and from 63.6% to 97.8% in the written narratives. We see the most consistent use of past tense in the written narratives of the high intermediate group. A general profile of tense use for each learner is given in Table 1 for the oral and written narratives.

In Table 1 the learners are arranged by their rates of appropriate use in the oral narratives. The low intermediate learners are identified by subject numbers 1-8. The letter following the subject number indicates the learner's first language, A(rabic), C(hinese), J(apanese), K(orean), and S(panish). Subject 1S in the low intermediate group shows the highest rate of appropriate use in her group for the oral narratives and Subject 8K shows the lowest. The high intermediate learners are identified by subject numbers 9-16 with Subject 9S showing the highest rate of appropriate use in the oral narratives in her level and 16C the lowest.

Table 1. Appropriate Use of Past Morphology In Past Time Contexts (in Percentages)

Low Intermediate			High Intermediate		
Learner	Oral	Written	Learner	Oral	Written
1S	60.6	89.5	9S	90.7	96.3
2C	55.6	87.1	10J	66.7	63.6
3K	54.6	45.8	11A	62.4	97.8
4A	52.1	30.4	12A	53.6	74.4
5A	46.9	88.9	13A	52.1	87.2
6A	42.1	44.8	14A	44.8	79.4
7A	32.7	80.0	15K	22.6	86.7
8K	31.8	53.3	16C	15.0	87.5

The main purpose for collecting oral and written versions of the narrative was to provide two means to test the learners' developing knowledge of tense use. We see from Table 1 that many learners showed improved rates of appropriate use of past tense in the written mode. Some learners, like 7A, 15K, and 16C show very low rates of appropriate use (below 35% accuracy) in the oral mode and rates at or above 80% accuracy in the written mode.[6] Other learners show very similar rates in both conditions, and two learners, 3K and 4A, show somewhat lower rates of appropriate use in the written narratives compared to their oral ones.

Discourse-sensitive and discourse-neutral tense use

The collected narratives were next divided into foreground, the actual story line, and background, the supportive material which does not itself narrate the main events. Rates of use of past and nonpast forms were calculated separately for the background and foreground of each learner narrative. Recall the nonpast forms include base as well as present forms. Verbs were coded using the procedure outlined above. When tense use in the foreground and background is examined separately, an interesting pattern of tense use for more than half of the learners is revealed: nine of the learners appear to be particularly sensitive to discourse organization in their use of tense. To simplify the description in this and the remaining sections, the low and high intermediate learners will be treated as a single group. An effort will be made to note differences between the groups where they exist.

Table 2 presents the percentage of the use of past and nonpast forms in the background and foreground of the narratives. Oral and written versions are presented separately. The learners have been divided into two groups according to the distribution of tense marking in the narratives.[7] The group whose tense usage seems to be sensitive to the background-foreground distinction is found under the heading "Discourse-Sensitive Tense Use" and the group whose tense use does not is found under the heading "Discourse-Neutral Tense Use." The division is made on the basis of the oral narrative because the other comparable learner narratives in previous second language studies have been oral (Kumpf 1984; Flashner 1989). The numbers in parentheses give the number of finite verbs used by the learners in the foreground and the background.

There are seven learners for whom discourse organization seems to make little difference in tense use in oral narratives. They are learners 2C, 4A, 7A, 9S, 14A, 15K, and 16C, i.e, three Arabic learners, one Chinese, one Korean, and one Spanish speaking learner. These learners show relatively consistent rates of appropriate use of past tense across foreground and background. Learner 2C, for example, shows 57.1% appropriate use of past in the foreground and 54.5% appropriate use in the background. This discourse-neutral use of tense seems to be possible at all levels of development. 9S shows consistent control of the past tense with an overall oral use of 90.7% and written use of 96.3%.[8] Learner 15K shows relatively little control of tense in the oral narrative with 22.6% appropriate use overall. Learners like 2C and 4A show mid-level development.

Nine learners show sensitivity to discourse organization in their use of tense. Learners in this group show a dramatic increase in the use of past or decrease in the

Table 2. Orientation of Tense Use

	ORAL			WRITTEN		
	Foreground	Background		Foreground	Background	
	Past Non-past	Past Non-past		Past Non-past	Past Non-past	

Discourse-Sensitive Use of Tense

	Foreground Past Non-past	Background Past Non-past	Foreground Past Non-past	Background Past Non-past
6A	77.8 22.2 (9)	10.0 90.0 (10)	37.5 62.5 (14)	50.0 50.0 (14)
1S	72.7 27.3 (22)	36.4 63.6 (11)	*92.6 7.4 (27)	81.8 18.2 (11)
12A	68.3 31.7 (41)	13.3 86.7 (15)	*83.3 16.7 (36)	28.6 71.4 (7)
10J	66.7 33.3 (6)	33.3 66.7 (3)	*100.0 --- (4)	42.9 57.1 (7)
3K	66.7 33.3 (9)	46.2 53.8 (13)	*77.8 22.2 (9)	26.7 73.3 (15)
11A	65.7 34.3 (70)	46.7 53.3 (15)	100.0 --- (39)	85.7 14.3 (7)
13A	60.0 40.0 (40)	20.0 80.0 (10)	*91.4 8.6 (35)	50.0 50.0 (4)
5A	56.4 43.6 (39)	10.0 90.0 (10)	*81.8 18.2 (22)	--- 100.0 (14)
8K	46.7 53.3 (15)	--- 100.0 (7)	*62.5 37.5 (16)	42.9 57.1 (14)

Discourse-Neutral Use of Tense

	Foreground Past Non-past	Background Past Non-past	Foreground Past Non-past	Background Past Non-past
9S	90.9 9.1 (33)	90.0 10.0 (10)	100.0 --- (42)	83.3 16.7 (12)
2C	57.1 42.9 (7)	54.5 45.5 (11)	78.9 21.1 (19)	100.0 --- (12)
4A	48.4 51.6 (31)	52.9 47.1 (17)	28.6 71.4 (14)	33.3 66.7 (9)
14A	44.4 55.6 (18)	45.5 54.5 (11)	90.9 9.1 (22)	58.3 41.7 (12)
7A	34.8 65.1 (43)	22.2 77.8 (9)	90.9 9.1 (22)	61.5 38.5 (13)
15K	28.6 71.4 (21)	11.1 88.9 (10)	*93.8 6.2 (32)	53.8 46.2 (13)
16C	27.3 72.7 (21)	6.7 93.3 (15)	82.4 17.6 (17)	100.0 --- (7)

9

use of nonpast in the foreground compared to the background. A 50% increase or decrease was chosen arbitrarily as the cut off point for inclusion in the discourse-sensitive group. As an illustration, consider the distribution of tense forms in the oral narrative of learner 1S. In this narrative, the past tense is used in 72.7% of the foreground clauses, but in only 36.4% of the background clauses, a drop of one-half. Nonpast is used in 27.3% of all foreground clauses, but increases to 63.6% in the background, an increase of over 5C%. Four of the learners in this group, 6A, 10J, 12A, and 13A, show near mirror· image rates of usage in tense across fore-ground and background in the oral narratives. By "mirror image" I mean that the rates of use for the past tense in the foreground are nearly the same as the rates of nonpast in the background and the rates of use of nonpast in the foreground is simi-lar to the rate of use of past in the background. In these narratives the dominance of one verb form is reversed in the foreground and background: past is the dominant form in the foreground and nonpast is the dominant form in the background. Learn-ers 5A and 11A show the same pattern, but less dramatically. The oral narrative of learner 8K shows higher use of past in the foreground (46.7%) than in the back-ground (no occurrence at all), but despite the increase in appropriate use, both fore-ground and background exhibit higher use of nonpast than past. All of these learners show discourse-sensitive use of tense, but the variation among learners suggests that a continuum of discourse sensitivity rather than a dichotomy might better describe learner tense use.

Learners whose tense use seems to be sensitive to discourse organization in their oral narratives do not necessarily show the same distribution in the written nar-ratives. There were nine learners who showed discourse-sensitive use of tense in the oral narratives. Seven of these learners, 1S, 3K, 5A, 8K, 10J, 12A, and 13A, show the same organization in the written mode. The remaining two learners are less sensitive to discourse organization in the written mode than in the oral mode. An additional learner (15K) who used past tense in only 28.6% of the foreground clauses in the oral narrative shows a strong preference for marking foreground verbs with past·in the written narratives, with 93.8% of the foreground but only 53.8% of the background verbs in the past tense. The written narratives which show dis-course-sensitive use of tense are indicated with an asterisk in Table 2.

To summarize, seven learners show discourse-sensitive use of tense in both oral and written modes, two learners are sensitive to discourse in only the oral mode, and another learner only in the written mode. Six learners show discourse-neutral use of tense in both modes.

Distribution of tenses

While the foreground can be characterized by higher rates of appropriate use of past tense as was shown in the previous section, the background is characterized by greater diversity of forms. This section examines the distribution of tense and aspect forms for all learners across foreground and background. Each verb in a past time context was coded for tense-aspect forms. In both oral and written conditions, verb forms in the foreground are essentially limited to past and base forms. In con-

Table 3. Distribution of Verbal Morphology in Foreground and Background

ORAL

Foreground			Background		
Total Finite Verbs		415	Total Finite Verbs		177
Past	243	58.6%	Past	59	33.3%
Simple	232	55.9%	Simple	44	24.9%
could + verb	5	1.2%	could + Verb	6	3.4%
Past Prog	1	.2%	Passive	6	3.4%
was + Verb	4	1.0%	Past Prog	1	.6%
was be kill	1	.2%	was + Verb	2	1.1%
Base	150	36.1%	Base	48	27.1%
Present	22	5.3%	Present	67	37.9%
Simple	17	4.1%	Simple	49	27.7%
can + Verb	4	1.0%	can + verb	16	9.0%
Pres Prog	1	.2%	Passive	2	1.1%
			Present Perfect	3	1.7%

WRITTEN

Total Finite Verbs		372	Total Finite Verbs		171
Past	317	85.2%	Past	108	63.2%
Simple	295	79.3%	Simple	84	49.1%
could + Verb	7	1.9%	could + Verb	8	4.7%
Past Prog	8	2.2%	Past Prog	6	3.5%
Passive	4	1.1%	Passive	7	4.1%
Past Perfect	2	.5%	Past Perfect	1	.6%
was + Verb	1	.3%	Perfect Prog	1	.6%
			was + Verb	1	.6%
Base	50	13.4%	Base	17	9.9%
Present	5	1.4%	Present	46	26.9%
Simple	4	1.1%	Simple	39	22.8%
can + Verb	1	.3%	can + Verb	7	4.1%

11

trast, the background exhibits the use of present tense in addition to past and base forms. In fact, the use of present tense exceeds the use of the base form. In the oral narratives the present tense is used as frequently as the past.

Each major category is listed in bold face with the number of verbs in each category and the percentage of use of the form relative to the total number of verbs. Included under the heading of "Past" are simple past forms which constitute the majority of verbs in this category, the use of *could* + verb, past passive, past progressive, past perfect, and misformations which are interpretable as carrying past morphology such as *was kill* or *was do*. Base forms show no alternation. Present forms are generally simple present, but also include the use of *can* + verb, and present passive. The verbs *put*, which occurred five times, and *cut* which occurred once, were eliminated from the corpus since they are ambiguous between base and past forms. A second ambiguity arose with nonpast verbs with third person plural subjects. Because only the third person singular in the present tense is overtly marked in English, all occurrences of third person plural forms are ambiguous between base forms and present forms. Of the 1,153 verbs in the corpus, 16 or 1.4% fell into this category. They were all coded as base forms.

Background clauses include active and stative verbs. Stative verbs make up 34.9% of the verbs in the background. Of the 122 stative verbs, 44.3% appear in the past and 55.7% in the present. Although statives are not predominantly present, present verbs are predominantly stative, with 73.9% of the 88 present tense verbs being stative.

In summary, the foreground is characterized by the relative higher rates of appropriate use of the past tense while the background shows lower rates of appropriate use of past and greater diversity of forms. The present tense, which is virtually absent in the foreground, appears in the background clauses of both the oral and written narratives. The previous sections have examined the distribution of tenses in the narratives and have shown that tense distribution is best understood in terms of discourse structure. The following section examines how tense is employed in the context of the unfolding narrative.

Tense Use in the Narrative Context

The effect of marking the foreground in past and the background in nonpast seems to be a heightened distinction of the narrative line. This section illustrate how learners use tense to structure their narratives.

Background

To better illustrate how tense is used at various points in the texts we adopt the five background categories used by Schiffrin (1981): orientation, embedded orientation, abstract, external evaluation, and coda.

Orientation: setting the scene. The introduction is the one background device that all learners employed in the oral and written narratives. The first orientation of the narrative sets the scene for the story. Among the nine learners who show dis-

course-sensitive use of tense in their oral narratives, four (5A, 6A, 8K, and 10J) show exclusive use of nonpast forms in the introductory orientation as shown in Examples (2) and (3). In the passages below, the learners employ the present perfect to provide background in the background itself.

(2) Uh there are uh, a boy, uh, living uh with uh his mother. His father have been killed, uh, by uh the King of the Sharks. And uh villager, villagers in uh his ul, village cannot uh take uh lobster from the bay because there is, there are sharks living in the in the bay. And uh, the boy this boy he wants to, he get uh borink from the sweet potato and [???] to eat because he wants to [ti] to eat uh lobster,

And he decided to take a lobster from the bay [first foreground event]
(Learner 5A; oral)

(3) Punias live live in [llvl], mother? Uh, uh [hl] his father has been killed by sharks because uh, they, Punia's country country is in the bays, in their ocean has many ten sharks,

One day his mother wanted to eat lobster [first foreground event]
(Learner 8K; oral)

These introductions are immediately followed by a past tense verb in the first complicating action clause as seen in the examples. The remaining five learners showed mixed use of tense in the introductions of the oral narratives as shown in Example (4). Four out of five of these orientations are immediately followed by a past tense verb in the first complicating action clause.

(4) OK. In Kohala there were ten, ah, ten, ah, ten arks? Sharks. And then nobody can go to the beach. So they just, uh, eat potato and uh, some, uh, some food. But, uh, the the lobster the lobster uh, lobsters were in the water and nobody can reach it.   (Learner 13A; oral)

In the nine written narratives which show discourse-sensitive use of tense, seven show mixed tense use and two show exclusive use of past.

Embedded orientation. A second type of scene setting is the embedded orientation which occurs in the body of the narrative. Six of the oral narratives exhibit embedded orientation clauses. Embedded orientation clauses are predominately nonpast with 83.3% (10/12 verbs) occurring in nonpast forms.

(5) And he told him...   complicating action
    he has a bag with him   embedded orientation
    when he dived in the sea..   complicating action
                                         (Learner 11A; oral)

13

(6) And uh, every day he did   complicating action
     that. The, uh, last day, King
     of the Shark,
     his name is Qualaiku   embedded orientation
     uh, he uh, Punia's, uh Punia's complicating action
     uh tell him uh ...   (Learner 8K; oral)

Six of the written narratives employ embedded orientation clauses, and they are evenly split between past forms and nonpast forms.

Abstracts. Abstracts, clauses which announce and summarize upcoming events, seem to have no particular tense preference. Four learners employed abstracts in their oral narratives. Of the five verbs used, three were in nonpast, one in past, and one, *put* in Example (7), was ambiguous. Four learners used abstracts in their written narrative. (Only two learners used abstracts in both oral and written modes.) Of the four verbs used, three were in past tense. All abstracts were added by the learners; the original narrative had no examples of abstracts.

(7) *and he, he put a trick for the sarks.*
     He get a big he got a big rock and ...   (Learner 1S; oral)

(8) The boy used two decives for the king of the shark
                                                   (Learner 5A; written)

(9) Punia had a good idea.
     He tricks for sharks   (Learner 15K; written)

External evaluation. An external evaluation "comments on and interprets events for the audience from a perspective outside the narrative action" (Schiffrin, 1981, p. 49). Like abstracts, external evaluations show no tense preference. Of the eight verbs used in all the evaluations, four were nonpast and four were past. Abstracts were not common in the oral narratives with only one token shown in (10) where the narrator indicates that what Punia has said is not true.

(10) Then he said, ah,complicating action
     "Karara. I trapped you. Eh, one of your,
     ah sharks told me that was the ninth one...
     but but no is, ah, no is.external evaluation
                                                   (Learner 13A; oral)

There were five external evaluations in three of the eight written narratives which showed discourse-sensitive use of tense. Like Example (), Example () comments on the tricks which are a particularly difficult part of the narrative. In order to trick the sharks, the boy says one thing and does another. The storytellers have marked some of the tricks explicitly.

(11) He was liaer   (Learner 5A; written)
(12) He isn't king, he was stupid.   (Learner 8K; written)

The evaluation in (12) also refers to a trick, but this time to the king's reaction to it. The storyteller tells us that the king is stupid, and perhaps that he is not worthy to be king. As in the case of the abstracts, outside evaluations were added by the learners.

Codas. Narratives are "optionally closed with a coda which ends the story and returns the listener to the present" (Schiffrin 1981, p. 49). Codas end the majority of the discourse-sensitive oral narratives (eight of the nine retellings have codas) and almost half of the written narratives (four of the nine). As shown in Examples (13) - (15), nonpast forms appear to dominate the codas. In the codas of oral narratives, 75% of the verbs are nonpast and 71.4% of the coda verbs in the written narratives are in nonpast.

(13) then after, then uh their countries uh his countries people uh can make
     fishfood.   (Learner 8K; oral)

(14) The people go back to the beach and do anything
                                                  (Learner 6A; oral)

(15) so all sharks are gone and all animals and people thank for Punia. Hawaii
     was very peaceful place.   (Learner 15K; written)

Among the background sections, the opening segments (the introductory orientation) and the closing segments (the codas) are frequently in nonpast. Embedded orientations, external evaluations, and abstracts occur about evenly in past and nonpast verb forms.

Foreground.

The foreground appears to be more homogeneous than the background with respect to tense use. There is one point where there is expected tense change, however, and that is in the reports of direct speech.

Direct speech. Direct speech occurs frequently throughout the original Punia narrative and the learners' narratives. The use of direct speech is quite common in narratives in general (Schiffrin, 1981; Wolfson, 1978; Tannen, 1990). In the Punia narrative, direct speech is the device by which the tricks are announced and much of the speech is in the nonpast. "Direct thought" is included with direct speech because it serves the same function of announcing the tricks. The report of direct speech presents a potential challenge to the learners because it necessitates a purposeful tense change from the past tense which dominates the narrative line to nonpast forms as in the following examples.

15

(16) and he told the king of the sark, "If you bite me, my mother come to see, and come to save, but if you, em, swallow me whole, I'm gonna die for forever." And the King of the the Sarks, swallow, mm the boy.

(Learner 1S; oral)

(17) Punia said, "I will go to bring some [bIta] to my mother's dinner." He *went* there he swim the beach...   (Learner 11A; oral)

(18) Punia called Ka-ale-ale and he *told* the shark, "I go to the sea and I get a lobster. If you swallow me and you bite me, I will die." Ka-ale-ale *thought* and the shark decide didn't bite him but swallowed him

(Learner 15K; written)

The use of past tense in the clauses before direct speech is higher than the total use of past tense throughout the oral narratives. This holds true for all learners, not just those who show discourse-sensitive use of tense. The use of past tense following direct speech is higher than the use of past overall in the oral narratives, and about the same in the written narratives. In the oral narratives, 91.8% of the direct speech is introduced by a past tense verb. The overall use of past in the oral narratives is 51.0%. Direct speech is followed by a past tense verb in 78.1% of all cases. In the texts which show discourse-sensitive use of tense, the same pattern emerges: past tense is used to set off direct speech. A comparison of the use of past tense preceding and following direct speech to the learners' use of past tense in the foreground shows that the use of past tense introducing direct speech is 93.8%, following direct speech is 78.1%, and in the foreground overall is 58.3%. In the written narratives, the use of past tense is higher so there is no difference in the overall rate of use between the narrative or narrative foreground and the use of past following direct speech. The use of the past to introduce direct speech is still higher than the use of past in general. For the entire group in the written narratives, 88.4% of the instances of direct speech are introduced by past tense compared to 78.3% of the clauses in past time contexts in the narrative overall. For the discourse-sensitive group, 100% of the instances of direct speech were introduced by the use of past tense, and 86.2% of the foreground clauses exhibited past tense.

Summary

Within the background, nonpast is particularly common in the introductions and in the codas, the portions of the narrative which form the boundaries of the story. The scene of the story is set in nonpast, base or present, seemingly apart from the time of the action of the narrative. The codas, whose purpose it is to bring the audience back to the present, do so by using nonpast forms. Native speakers seem to do this by using the past with adverbials such as *forever* and *from that time on*. Just as the use of past and nonpast forms distinguishes the foreground from the background, the high concentration of past forms before direct speech functions to mark a change in voice from the narrator to one of the characters.

16

DISCUSSION

In his crosslinguistic study, Hopper claimed that "from a discourse viewpoint tense-aspect becomes intelligible" (1979, p.239). It is no surprise that the use of verbal morphology by learners of English can also best be understood from the perspective of discourse structure. The rates of appropriate use of past tense in past time contexts in the foreground are often higher than the rates of appropriate use in the narrative overall, and in the background. The use of tense to distinguish the narrative line from the background is more pronounced for some learners than others. But all learners showed a greater variety of tenses in the background than in the foreground, with the notable addition of the present in the background. Although the original story was told with only past tense forms and all but one of the native-speaker narratives used exclusively past forms, learners may respond to the non-sequential nature of the background by using non-past forms.

Discourse-sensitive use of tense seems to be common to classroom learners examined here and the non-classroom learners reported on in previous studies. Such use of tense is also common to both the oral and written mode. The eleven learners in this study who showed discourse-sensitive use of tense seem to show similar use to the three Russian speakers reported on in Flashner (1989): the use of past forms in the foreground, and nonpast in the background. Flashner concluded that the pattern of usage in the native speakers of Russian represented an instance of transfer from the Russian aspectual system to the developing interlanguage. Although transfer may be a contributing factor in the case of the Russian learners of English, in this study we see that speakers of a particular language do not necessarily pattern alike with respect to discourse-sensitive tense use: no single language group was exclusively discourse-sensitive or discourse-neutral.

These learners' use of past tense to mark foreground clauses and nonpast to mark background clauses contrasts with the use of verbal morphology found by Kumpf for one Japanese learner of English and by Givón for Hawaiian Creole in which speakers morphologically marked verbs in the background, but did not mark verbs in the foreground. Both systems seem to be consistent with Hopper's observation that languages may have specialized markers for either foreground or background or both.

The use of tense to mark foreground and background may reflect a learner's level of development. The learners in this study are all intermediate learners, but we may extrapolate to beginning and advanced levels. Schumann (1987) reported that basilang learners (very low level learners) do not use tense forms systematically to make semantic distinctions in tense or aspect. Schumann rejects the possibility that foreground or background information is distinguished in the narratives he examined. On the other end of development is native-speaker English, which does not rely primarily on tense or aspect markers to distinguish foreground from background. This means that intermediate learners of English will have to abandon an apparently functional and systematic use of tense in order to achieve native-like competence in the language. Consider the most advanced learner in the study, 9S, who shows consistently high use of past tense in foreground and background (at

least 90% in foreground and background of the oral narrative, and 100% in the foreground and 83.3% in background of the written narrative). This high rate of usage of past tense in foreground and background is necessary to achieve target-like use of tense in English narratives of the type in this study. We may hypothesize that after a period of unsystematic use of verbal morphology, discourse-sensitive learners may first use past tense in foreground clauses and subsequently generalize it to background clauses. Cross-sectional or longitudinal data are necessary to test this hypothesis.

An additional question for future research is whether the verbal morphology which ostensibly appears to be tense marking is in fact tense, or aspect, or a transitional form. Andersen (1991), Robison (1990), Kumpf (1984), and Flashner (1989) argue that early use of what is tense morphology in the target language may be an aspectual marker in interlanguage. Analysis of the aspectual class of the verbs in the foreground and background would help to determine whether the learners use target tense morphology to mark aspectual classes. Cross-sectional or longitudinal narrative data would help to determine whether learners are in a transitional stage from using tense as an aspectual marker to using tense as a tense marker in a target-like manner.

In summary, we have shown that the use of tense by adult intermediate-level learners of English can be best understood through the discourse structure of the narrative. Although the interlanguage narratives examined do not exhibit elaborate tense systems, some learners do seem to use verbal morphology systematically. Learners employ newly developing, and thus limited, linguistic resources to delimit the main story line and the background information, guiding the listener or reader through the narrative as they tell their tales.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE AUTHOR

Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig is Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Indiana University. She has published in the areas of second language acquisition, pragmatics, and teacher education. She investigates the acquisition of grammatical systems by adult second language learners and the development of pragmatic competence.

NOTES

[1]The original spelling and punctuation from the learner texts are presented in the examples.

18

[2]There is some evidence that the retelling of the story may have been difficult for some learners. Twenty-two learners, thirteen low intermediate and nine high intermediate, heard the story. Of those, 16 completed the oral re-tell. Five low intermediate students (four native speakers of Japanese and one native speaker of Chinese) and one high intermediate native speaker of Chinese did not produce an oral narrative when interviewed. This changed the balance of the L1s represented in the sample.

[3]There were no conditional uses of could. These were strictly instances of could meaning `was/were able to.'

[4]The one exception was one NS narrative written almost entirely in historical present: 82.6% (29/35 verbs) were in the present. Schiffrin observes that narratives entirely in historical present are relatively rare (1981, p. 51).

[5]Native speaker narratives were collected to determine what tense native speakers would use in this task. Further comparisons between native-speaker and learner narratives are beyond the scope of this paper.

[6]It is unlikely that the pronunciation of the past tense alone causes the difference in past tense use in the oral and written narratives of these three learners because 72.0% of the foreground verbs have irregular past tense target forms which do not have word-final consonant clusters.

[7]It is likely that two groups is a simplification. Future work may show that there is a continuum of sensitivity to discourse organization with respect to tense.

[8]Based on the written narratives of the 24 native speakers which show consistent se of past forms throughout, we may say that learner 9S, with the lowest use of nonpast forms of any learner in the study, exhibits the most target-like production.

REFERENCES

Andersen, R. (1991). Developmental sequences: The emergence of aspect marking in second language acquisition. In C. A. Ferguson & T. Huebner (eds.) *Second Language Acquisition and Linguistic Theories* (pp. 305-324). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Dahl, Ö. (1984). Temporal distance: Remoteness distinctions in tense-aspect systems. In B. Butterworth, B.

Comrie, & Ö. Dahl (Eds.), *Explanations for language universals* (pp. 105-22). Berlin: Mouton.

Dry, H. (1981). Sentence aspect and the movement of narrative time. Text, 1, 233-40.

Dry, H. (1983). The movement of narrative time. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 12, 19-53.

Flashner, V. E. (1989). Transfer of Aspect in the English oral narratives of native Russian Speakers. In H. Dechert & M. Raupauch (Eds.), *Transfer in language production* (pp. 71-97). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Givón, T. (1982). Tense-aspect-modality: The Creole prototype and beyond. In P. J. Hopper (Ed.), *Tense and aspect: Between semantics and pragmatics* (pp. 115-63). Typological studies in languages 1. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Hopper, P. J. (1979). Aspect and foregrounding in discourse. In T. Givón (Ed.), *Discourse and syntax* (pp. 213-41). Syntax and Semantics, 12. New York: Academic Press.

Kumpf, L. (1984). Temporal systems and universality in interlanguage: A case study. In F. Eckman, L. Bell, & D. Nelson (Eds.), *Universals of second language acquisition* (pp. 132-43). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Labov, W. (1972). The transformation of experience in narrative syntax. In W. Labov (Ed.), *Language in the inner city* (pp. 354-96). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Labov, W., & Waletzky, J. (1967). Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. In J. Helm (Ed.), *Essays on the verbal and visual arts* (pp. 12-44). Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Robison, R. E. (1990). The primacy of aspect: Aspectual marking in English Interlanguage. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 12, 315-30.

Schiffrin, D. (1981). Tense variation in narrative. *Language*, 57, 45-62.

Schumann, J. (1987). The expression of temporality in basilang speech. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 9, 21-41.

Tanner., D. (1989). *Talking voices: Repetition dialogue, and imagery in conversational discourse.* Studies in interactional sociolinguistics 6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wolfson, N. (1979). The conversational historical present alternation. *Language*, 55, 168-82.

—————O——— ——