AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE TENSE/ASPECT PREFERENCES OF TURKISH SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH AND NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS IN THEIR ORAL NARRATION

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Abstract

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The study of SLA began around the beginning of the 70s with the emergence of both theoretical and empirical studies. Undoubtedly, the acquisition of tense/aspect, besides other topics, has attracted much interest from . researchers. This study investigated the use of telic and atelic verb forms in the oral production of Turkish speakers of English (non-native speakers or NNSs) and native speakers of English (NSs). To elicit how the foreground and background of narrative formed; which tense/aspect is preferred in the foreground and background, each participant produced one monologue whose topic was retelling a film. The results showed that the discourse of non-native speakers exhibit target-like qualities not only in terms of usage of verbs according to their inherent semantic aspect of verbs only but also in terms of distribution of verb types in the foreground and background of discourse.

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 70s and Selinker's seminal study *Interlanguage*, interlanguage and second language acquisition studies have been providing a vast body of knowledge for teachers, students, and course book writers. Researchers in the field put forward new theories accounting for the acquisition process or new empirical support for former theories. For example, the ontogeny model[*] refers to L1 transfer and developmental processes (Major, 1987), and leads the remark: "The Dual nature of IL (Interlanguage) grammars is captured by the Ontogeny Model of second language acquisition. According to this model, there are two types of errors in IL: transfer errors and developmental errors (O'Grady & Archibald, 2004: 478). Another hypothesis dealing with the developmental errors in the acquisition of L1 and L2 is the aspect hypothesis, which is also known as defective tense hypothesis, or primacy of the aspect hypothesis (Bardovi-Harlig, 1994), or aspect first hypothesis (Wagner, 2001). Thirdly, addressing interlanguage development, discourse hypothesis holds that learners use verbal morphology to distinguish foreground from background in the narratives. While, aspect hypothesis asserts that the beginning learners tend to use verbal morphology to mark lexical aspectual distinctions (states vs. dynamic events, durative vs. punctual events, telic vs.

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[*] Drawing attention to the drawbacks in his original theory, Major (2002) was to replace his Ontogeny Model theory with that of The Ontogeny Phylogeny Model of Language Acquisition and Change.

atelic events) rather than temporal distinctions, the discourse hypothesis asserts that learners have a tendency to use past marking on foreground events and present marking or zero marking on background events (Yang & Huang, 2004). According to Comajoan and Saldanya (2005) the term discourse hypothesis was originated by Bardovi-Harlig, and is currently used in studies of the acquisition of L2 morphology.

Haznedar (2006), in a study she conducted on Turkish children acquiring first language, suggests that when inflections emerge in acquring L1 or L2, their distribution across verb classes is determined by inherent aspect. For example, when the child begins to produce inflections in L1, he/she uses past tense morphology exclusively on punctual predicates such as *broke*, *fell* and *found*. The emerging tense-aspect inflections are, to some extent, compatible with the aspect-before-tense hypothesis in that achievements and accomplishments are the first to be employed in using the past tense. From what we gather from Haznedar's statement, past morphology is thus first used with telic verbs.

Investigating Wh- movement, or subjacency or acquisition of questions, most of the studies in second language acquisition have focused on syntax[•]; however, as Victorri (2005) highlights, semantics should not be ignored because all human languages possess complex systems of markers for expressing aspect (durative, perfective, etc.). Aspect and tense are two different grammatical categories: while tense is the grammatical term that refers to the time when the action of the verb occurs (past, present, and future), aspect, unlike tense, is not concerned with placing events on a time line. Aspect is concerned with making distinctions about the kinds of actions that are described by verbs: progressive actions, punctual actions, habitual actions, etc (Richards, Platt, and Platt, 1992). The fact that some languages have no grammatical tense takes attention to the importance of aspect in human languages (Victorri, 2005). Bardovi-Harlig (1994), arguing that the aspect hypothesis and the discourse hypothesis have their roots in the theories of temporal semantics (1998), classifies the studies on the development temporality in interlanguage examining the meaning and function of verbal morphology belonging to the subfields of semantics and discourse analysis, which are known in European linguistics as functional semantics.

Oral narration is the most studied variety in discourse; and the tense switch on the narrative line is one of the most attractive debate; researchers have investigated how past and present tenses (that is 'narrative present' which marks past time) are used in the narration (Carruthers, 2003).Yet, for our purposes, we will not deal with tense switch issue because we are interested in the aspectual distinction and foregrounding and backgrounding in discourse.

Researchers have identified a number of linguistics (Howard, 2004) and data elicitation factors as potential factors behind the tense-aspect variations of L2 learners. Such factors include grammatical aspect, discourse grounding, type of narrative elicited (Camps, 2002), inherent lexical aspect (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992), phonetic saliency (Bayley, 1994), and functional value (Howard, 2004).

 In this paper we will examine the influence of narrative structure and lexical aspect, (or as Labelle et al., 2002 suggest, 'situational aspect') on the use of tense-aspect morphology by adult learners of English as a foreign language and compare the results with the narratives of native speakers. We will thus discuss the two separate hypotheses of second language acquisition research: the aspect hypothesis, which holds that the interlanguage verbal morphology is determined by lexical aspectual class (or ie, Aristotelian Aspect) and the discourse hypothesis, which holds it is determined by narrative structure (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998). We should not, however, ignore the overlap between the two hypotheses. As Salaberry

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[•] Some scholars, like Slabakova (2002), argue that the literature on acquisition of questions, negation, null subjects, etc is less than the literature on acquisition of tense and aspect which have proved a more prolific topic in the field of language acquisition.

(1998) noted, "…there is an inherent overlap between the prediction offered by the discourse-based approach and that offered by the account based on the lexical semantic value of the predicate, since completed events and punctual events sometimes define the notion of foreground." To explain this overlap we could say that the aspect hypothesis predicts that telic (having an end point and a goal) verbs will carry simple past morphology and the discourse hypothesis predicts that the verbs in the foreground will carry simple past morphology (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998).

Generally, studies of the aspect hypothesis have been conducted with the participation of untutored learners; however, recent studies of the aspect hypothesis have shown that even instructed learners are not immune from the influence of lexical aspectual class (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998).

Our analysis will be based on the classification of verb classes which was originated by Vendler (1967), who distinguished four different categories: states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements (ctd. in Bardovi-Harlig, 1998, 472). Andersen (1991) offers three semantic features to help to distinguish the four semantic verb classes; these features are related to the absence of duration in an action (punctual), presence of a specific endpoint in an action (telic), and the change an action does or does not produce (dynamic) (Camps, 2002). The four verb classes are distinguished from each other referring to the positive or negative values of these three features. The most significant difference is between state verbs (-punctual, -telic, and –dynamic) and achievements (+punctual, +telic, +dynamic). Without any specific endpoint, states persist over time without change and include verbs such as *seem, have*, *know*, *need*, *want*, and *be* (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998). Achievements (such as *arrive, see, jump, leave, notice, recognize,* and *fall asleep*) are differentiated from activities and accomplishment in having a definite beginning or end point; that is they indicate the beginning or end of an action. The basic difference between accomplishment and achievement is that while both have end points (+telic), accomplishments have an inherent duration (-punctual). The table below illustrates the differences between verb aspectual classes:

Table 1. Verbal aspectual classes (Comajoan, 2005)

	Atelic		Telic	
	States	**Activities**	**Accomplishments**	**Achievements**
Punctual	-	-	-	+
Telic	-	-	+	+
Dynamic	-	+	+	+

We should, however, again warn the reader that the categories in the table are also referred to as lexical aspect, which contrasts with morphological (or grammatical) aspect (Comajoan, 2005). Camps (2002) draws our attention stating "when we carry out a semantic classification, it is necessary to consider not jut verbs, but predicates" (p.180). So, while *to write* is an activity with no specific end point, *to write a letter/book/note* becomes an accomplishment because the complements *letter*, *book*, or *note* provides and endpoint to the action.

Regarding past-tense marking in the interlanguage of a fossilized learner, Lakshmanan and Selinker (2001) suggest re-defining the obligatory context in terms of the inherent semantic aspect of the predicate, ie *achievement* and *accomplishment* [+telic] verbs *are* marked for past tense by L2 learners at a higher rate than *activity* and *state*(-telic) verbs, and (b) grounding in discourse i.e., the past tense is used by learners to mark events or situations that move the narrative forward, and is not used with background information. Against the arguments put forward by Lakshmanan and Selinker, Lardiere (2003) argues that the Aspect

Hypothesis and the Discourse Hypothesis are applicable only to the beginning stages of L2 acquisition, and not to later stages (cited in Purdy, 2005).

Slabokova's (2002) analyzed three studies and she summarizes her observations as follows:

1. Learners first use (perfective) past marking on achievements and accomplishments, eventually extending use to activities and states.
2. In languages that encode the perfective/imperfective distinction, imperfective past appears later than perfective past, and imperfective past marking begins with states, extending to activities, accomplishments and achievements.
3. In languages that have progressive aspect, progressive marking begins with activities, and then extends to accomplishments and achievements.
4. Progressive marking is not incorrectly over generalized to states (p.173-174).

Although the aspect hypothesis has been well-attested in research on L1 and L2 acquisition of such Indo-European languages as English, French, and Spanish, there are few studies to test the aspect hypothesis in the acquisition of English by NNSs. This paper, on the one hand, aims to fill this gap; and on the other, using the same elicitation method for both native speaker group and L2 learner group, aims to find out the differences and similarities in the usage of aspect markers in the oral narratives of both groups of speakers. Contrary to some tense-aspect studies which focus on children's language use or L2 learners with beginner level (Bayley, 1994; Camps, 2002; Comajoan & Saldanya 2005; Labelle et al., 2002; Wagner, 2001), in our study we focused on adult L2 learners at advanced level.

Research Questions

In this study, we will seek responses to the following questions:

- Which aspect and predicate types are commonly used in the oral narratives of native and non-native speakers of English?
- To what extent do non-native speakers of English use telic and atelic predicates in a target-like manner?
- To what extent do non-native speakers' narratives exhibit target-like qualities in terms of usage of telic and atelic predicates?
- What is the distribution of four classes (states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements) of verbs in the foreground and the background of native and non-native speakers' discourse?

Data collection

Participants

The participants in this study were 17 students (11 females and 6 males ranging between 21-25 years of age), first year Turkish students of English studying at the English Language Teaching Department of Çukurova University and four native speakers (all females ranging between 20-23 years of age), all university graduates with education majors.

Materials

The movie *Christmas Carol*, which was based on the novel written by the famous English novelist Charles Dickens with the same title, was used to elicit oral narratives in this study. Having watched the film, the participants were asked to provide an oral summary of the film. This film was chosen because of its relatively small number of characters: Ebenezer Scrooge, Bob Cratchit (Scrooge's overworked employee), and the ghosts. The relatively less complex

plot of the novel also made it easy for the participants to refer to the persons, things, and events in the film.

Compared with personal narratives, elicited narratives such as retelling a film, or picture stories demonstrate some advantages:

    a) the sequence of events is known to the researcher independent of the narrative itself

    b) elicited narratives could be compared across learners

    c) the content of a picture story and/or a film may be manipulated to test specific rules of distribution of verb classes (Bardovi-Harlig, 1994).

Procedure

Being interviewed individually, the Turkish participants of the study were asked to record their narratives in a language lab classroom, where their narratives were audio-recorded and then transcribed on a personal computer. Since these participants were the students of the English Language Teaching department at the time of the study, they were all enrolled in an obligatory, first-semester speaking class. The four native speaker participants (all Americans) were asked to present their narratives, which were also audio-recorded and then transcribed, in one of the researchers' offices.

Data analysis

It is rather a difficult task to determine the advent of a new discourse unit in oral narration. The problem is how to mark a shift in the course of discourse. Regarding *after*, *before*, *when*, *while*, and *as* subordinate clauses, we referred to Prideaux and Hogan's (1994) study on discourse. In their study, they found that sentences which begin with subordinate clauses are more marked than sentences beginning with main clauses. The data they analyzed proved their hypothesis about discourse boundaries. According to this hypothesis, marked structures serve to code discourse boundaries and signal the advent of new discourse unit. It is argued that while telic verbs (verbs having end points or goals) are common in the foreground of discourse, in the background the number of occurrences of atelic verbs is much bigger (Bardovi-Harlig, 1994).

Regarding the other sentence types, we followed the example of Bardovi-Harlig (1998); clauses that moved the narrative time forward were identified as foreground clauses. Bardovi-Harlig seems to have been inspired by Dry (1983), who offered a textual criterion for evaluating time; according to Dry the information conveyed in the foreground must be new rather than given (ctd. in Bardovi-Harlig, 1998, 476). In collaboration, grounding analysis was performed on all 17 non-native and 4 native speaker texts.

Regarding aspectual classes, each verb phrase was assigned to one of the four aspectual classes according Vendler's (1967) taxonomy. And as in Bardovi-Harlig's (1998) study, direct speech was excluded from both calculations because it is not an original utterance of the participants themselves.

Results and Discussion

The overall distribution of the 717 predicates analyzed in this study is shown in Table 2 below. In terms of verb classes, nearly one third of the predicates were states (34.6%); more than one fourth achievements (28.3%) and again more than one fourth accomplishments (26.8%), and about one tenth were activities (10%). Regarding the time frame, the majority of

the predicates (71.1%) were in the present tense and about only one third in the past tense (28.9%). While the number of the states and accomplishments in the present tense was higher than that of the past tense, the number of achievements and activities was higher in the past tense than that of the present. A Chi-Square test indicate a significant difference in the use of states among verb classes (p=.000).

Table 2: Distribution of past and present frame verb forms across aspectual class (Percentage/ Raw Frequency)

	ACH	ACC	ACT	STA	TOTAL
Past	35.3 (73)	23.2 (48)	11.1 (23)	30.4 (63)	28.9 (207)
Present	25.5 (130)	28.2 (144)	10.0 (51)	36.3 (185)	71.1 (510)
Total	28.3 (203)	26.8 (192)	10.3 (74)	34.6 (248)	100 (717)

ACH= achievements, ACC=accomplishments, ACT=activities, STA=states

Next, we will consider the distribution of verb forms in the foreground and background. Table 3 below shows this distribution.

Table 3: Distribution of aspectual classes across foreground and background in the participants' monologues (Percentage/ Raw Frequency)

	ACH	ACC	ACT	STA	TOTAL
Background	9.5 (36)	14.8 (56)	16.9 (64)	58.8 (223)	52.9 (379)
Foreground	49.4 (167)	40.2 (136)	3.0 (10)	7.4 (25)	47.1 (338)
Total	28.3 (203)	26.8 (192)	10.3 (74)	34.6 (248)	100 (717)

As we can observe from the table, there is a rather close distribution of verb forms in the foreground and the background. The almost 6% difference (background 52.9%; foreground 47.1%) was not found statistically significant (p=0.490): . While the background was heavily populated by States and Activities, Achievements and Accomplishments were mostly used in the foreground.

The oral productions of native speakers shown in Table 4 below, illustrate that the four participants used mostly the present tense in their narratives. Interestingly, the numbers of achievements and states in both the past and the present tense were the same. These two forms, with a frequency of 34.7%, were the verb forms used most.

Table 4: Distribution of past and present frame verb forms across aspectual class in native speakers' monologues (Percentage/ Raw Frequency)

	ACH	ACC	ACT	STA	TOTAL
Past	11.0 (13)	3.4 (4)	6.8 (8)	11.0 (13)	32.2 (38)
Present	23.7 (28)	16.9 (20)	3.4 (4)	23.7 (28)	67.8 (80)
Total	34.7 (41)	20.3 (24)	10.2 (12)	34.7 (41)	100 (118)

Regarding grounding in discourse, as shown in Table 5 below, the close distribution of verb forms in the foreground and background recurs in the narratives of native speakers. Out of the 118 predicates used, 49.2% were used in the background and 50.8% in the foreground.

Achievements and accomplishments were the mostly preferred forms in the foreground, and activities and states occupied the largest part in the background.

Table 5: Distribution of aspectual classes across foreground and background in native speakers' monologues (Percentage/ Raw Frequency)

	ACH	ACC	ACT	STA	TOTAL
Background	8.5 (10)	6.8 (8)	5.1 (6)	28.8 (34)	49.2 (58)
Foreground	26.3 (31)	13.6 (16)	5.1 (6)	5.9 (7)	50.8 (60)
Total	34.7 (41)	20.3 (24)	10.2 (12)	34.7 (41)	100 (118)

The oral productions of non-native speakers are shown in Table 6 below. The 17 participants used mostly the present tense in their narratives. The comparison of verb forms across tense choice displays that with all of the verb forms the presents tense is used most.

Table 6: Distribution of past and present frame verb forms across aspectual class in NNSs' monologues (Percentage/ Raw Frequency)

	ACH	ACC	ACT	STA	TOTAL
Past	10.0 (60)	7.3 (44)	2.5 (15)	8.3 (50)	28.2 (169)
Present	17.0 (102)	20.7 (124)	7.8 (47)	26.2 (157)	71.8 (430)
Total	27.0 (162)	28.0 (168)	10.4 (62)	34.6 (207)	100 (599)

As can be observed from Table 7 below, there is a rather close distribution of verb forms in the foreground and background of NNSs' narratives. Out of total 599 predicates, 46.4% were observed to be used in the background; and 53.6% in the foreground. While, achievements and accomplishments were the forms preferred mostly in the foreground, activities and states were greatly employed in the background.

Table 7: Distribution of aspectual classes across foreground and background in NNSs' monologues (Percentage/ Raw Frequency)

	ACH	ACC	ACT	STA	TOTAL
Background	4.3 (26)	8.0 (48)	9.7 (58)	31.6 (189)	46.4 (278)
Foreground	22.7 (136)	20.0 (120)	0.7 (4)	3.0 (18)	53.6 (321)
Total	27.0 (162)	28.0 (168)	10.4 (62)	34.6 (207)	100 (599)

While in Flashner's (1989) study three Russian learners of English distinguished foreground from background in their oral narratives by marking the foreground predominantly in simple past and background in base forms, in our study the participants, both native and non-natives, distinguished foreground from background by marking the foreground with achievements and accomplishment verbs, and the background with activities and states.

Aksu-Koc (1998) argued that in Turkish, one can notice a strong inter-relationship between tense and aspect, and modality on Markers of Aspect emerges earlier than markers of tense in languages in which tense and aspect have different morphological representation. The data obtained from a Turkish child (between the age of 21–30 months) provide evidence in favour of her argument and of the fact that there is a cross-linguistic tendency in early child language to use tense inflections to express aspect. As suggested by Aksu-Koc (1998), the

past tense marker *-dI*, which focuses equally on the process and its completion, and which encodes the informational perspective of a direct experiencer (i.e. it encodes the past of direct evidence) is mainly used with telic verbs (qtd. in Avram, 2006).

Interestingly, both native and non-native speakers in this study did not observe the rules of lexical aspect in their narration. The use of both atelic and telic verbs (achievements and accomplishments) in the present tense was a clear indication of lexical aspect's non-control on the choice of tense in adult narration. The fact that Turkish, in its grammar, makes a clear distinction between direct and indirect experience, separating personal observation of processes from both inference and narrative, could account for the Turkish speakers' use of the present tense predominantly.

Despite the fact that native speakers used a wider selection of verb types - roughly twice as many as NNSs - it is remarkable that the distribution of verb types across lexical aspectual classes and discourse grounding was found to be very similar.

Conclusion

While the results of this study offer support for the discourse hypothesis, they, however, suggest that aspect hypothesis would not be applicable to adult non-native speakers. In this study, while achievement and accomplishment verbs were mostly used in the foreground, states and activity verbs were employed in the background. In line with the oral production of the participants in Camps' study, the participants of this present research also mostly used the present tense forms in contexts when past tense would be required according to the aspect hypothesis. The results also suggest that while lexical aspect (the inherent semantic aspect) has limited influence, narrative structure has strong potential influence on the distribution of tense-aspect morphology in the language production of the participants.

The data from the task show that the selection of past-tense marking by native and non-native speakers does not coincide with respect to the prototypical use of grammatical aspect (inherent semantic values). As was illustrated above, the narratives of native and non-native speakers reveal statistically significant similarity in terms of past and present tense usage.

The fact that the data was elicited only via oral narratives reminds us that the results of this investigation may yet need to be confirmed with additional evidence from empirical studies including other modes of data collection (e.g., oral versus written data), and comparison of different types of discourse (e.g., personal interview in contrast with narratives).

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