

# *Tense-Aspect-Modality in a Second Language*

Contemporary perspectives

EDITED BY

Martin Howard

Pascale Leclercq

STUDIES IN BILINGUALISM

JOHN BENJAMINS

PUBLISHING COMPANY

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**John Benjamins Publishing Company**

Amsterdam / Philadelphia



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences – Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

DOI 10.1075/sibil.50

**Cataloging-in-Publication Data available from Library of Congress:**  
**LCCN 2016025743 (PRINT) / 2016039942 (E-BOOK)**

ISBN 978 90 272 4192 4 (HB)  
ISBN 978 90 272 6649 1 (E-BOOK)

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## Tense-Aspect-Modality in a Second Language

# *Studies in Bilingualism (SiBil)*

ISSN 0928-1533

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## **Volume 50**

**Tense-Aspect-Modality in a Second Language. Contemporary perspectives**  
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## INTRODUCTION

# **Tense, aspect and modality in second language acquisition**

## **An overview**

Martin Howard and Pascale Leclercq

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### **1. Introduction**

This volume aims to explore new avenues in the well-researched field of the acquisition of tense, aspect and modality (TAM) in a second language (L2). The studies presented focus primarily on L2 French and English, and allow innovative insights into contemporary issues and approaches underlying TAM research, but also illuminate wider issues of relevance to other languages and the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research in general.

As a research area within SLA, the acquisition of TAM has been one of the most active, giving rise to an extensive body of research. As a basic category of our experience and cognition, TAM relations are a key feature of how speakers present events. Accordingly, the learner uses pragmatic or linguistic means for their expression very early on, even if they are not the most appropriate from a target language perspective. Indeed, without such means, the learner's interlocutor may have difficulty understanding, as speakers are expected to locate events in time in their discourse, impose an aspectuo-temporal perspective on those events, and further engage in the aspectuo-temporal marking of the relationship that might hold between different events. Since the learner has already acquired such means in his/her first language (L1), (s)he is therefore in some way accustomed to knowing that such relations need to be signalled, albeit in oftentimes very different ways in the L2. The fact that linguistic markers differ across languages constitutes the key challenge for the learner who must hone in on the target language system, while at the same time being potentially influenced by his/her L1 system.

Given the multiplicity and complexity of the acquisition challenge in hand, numerous studies have attempted to illuminate facets of the L2 learner's aspectuo-temporal development. With a view to better situating the contribution of this volume within the field of L2 TAM research, we provide a short overview of that work



in the following with particular reference to the two principle languages under investigation, namely French and English, which present interesting cross-linguistic differences for the acquisition of L2 TAM. Thereafter, we present a synopsis of the individual studies which are presented in the subsequent chapters.

## **2. The L2 learner's tense-aspect system: Emergence of tense-aspect markers**

While the acquisition of verb morphology can be viewed from different perspectives such as the expression of number, person and agreement,<sup>1</sup> L2 studies have predominantly focused on the emergence and use of such means in relation to the expression of temporality.

In this regard, the learner needs to acquire the linguistic and pragmatic means available in the target language in order to anchor events in the past, the present and the future, and to impose an aspectual perspective on them. The wide-ranging studies that exist show that the target language tense-aspect markers emerge slowly and gradually in the learner's language system, and that they are subject to linguistic variation in their usage; this makes for considerable divergence from the aspectuo-temporal system of the target language. For example, during the 1980s, a seminal European Science Foundation (ESF) Project (see Perdue 1993a) tracked adult naturalistic learners of various source and target languages over a period of three years; this longitudinal approach allowed for potential universal characteristics to be identified in the learners' acquisition trajectory. While tense-marking morphology differs across languages, the learners did not initially use such morphology, but rather relied heavily on lexical and pragmatic strategies. These means are far from target-like but communicatively efficient, and characterise a stage known as the 'basic variety', shared by all learners (for a presentation, see Klein & Perdue 1997). Taken together, lexical and pragmatic strategies evidenced the implicit and explicit devices from which tense-aspect relations can be inferred on the part of the learner's interlocutor. For example, in the case of lexical devices, the learners were found to use temporal adverbs and adverbials which signal the time period, as well as the frequency and aspectual duration of the event. At a pragmatic level, the underlying semantic meaning of a verb to refer to an event, even without inflectional morphology, can be used to infer whether the event might be a state or an on-going action, and therefore unbounded (e.g. 'live' or 'run') or bounded, and as such, more likely to be presented as a completed action

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1. See, for example, Bartning (1998) and Howard (2006) for studies in relation to marking of third person plural irregular verb forms in the present tense in L2 French.

(e.g. 'notice'). A further pragmatic strategy relates to Klein's (1994) Principle of Natural Order (PNO), whereby events are generally recounted in chronological order, and the interlocutor can consequently infer the temporal sequence in which they may have occurred.

While Klein and Perdue (1997; Perdue & Klein 1992) see the pragmatic and lexical means characterizing the basic learner variety as being extremely efficient, in isolation, they are nonetheless very non-native-like. These authors see the linguistic limitations and potential misunderstandings that arise as a motivational factor underlying the emergence of verb morphology in the learner's language system. In this regard, various studies, both of naturalistic and instructed learners, have documented the patterns of acquisition underlying its emergence (see, for example, Bardovi-Harlig 2000; Bartning & Schlyter 2004; Dietrich et al. 1995; Giacalone Ramat 1992; Harley 1992; Salaberry 2001). The acquisition of past tense forms has been an especially fruitful area of inquiry in various languages, as we will outline below.

## 2.1 Acquisition and use of tense-aspect verb morphology: The case of the past tenses

As regards the emergence of verbal morphology, there is a very clear sequential pattern of development, whereby learners initially use bare verb forms, and even if such forms are used with inflectional morphology, they appear to constitute lexicalised forms or allomorphs which are not used with productive meaning.

Beyond the use of lexicalised forms which are devoid of productive meaning, forms of the simple present are the first to be used. They are initially found to be overextended to past tense contexts, where perfective forms such as the simple past in English and the *passé composé* in French subsequently emerge. Indeed, the present continues to co-occur with perfective forms proper in past tense contexts, with some studies suggesting that the present is especially used in place of past imperfective forms (see Bergström 1997; Kaplan 1987; Kihlstedt 1998). The latter, such as the *imparfait* in French and the past progressive in English, are seen as posing particular difficulty to the learner. This pattern of usage has led some authors to argue that aspect is acquired before tense; this line of reasoning has formed the basis for the Aspect Hypothesis proposed by Andersen (1991) (see discussion below). That is to say, the L2 learner seems to mark the (im)perfective distinction by distinguishing perfective contexts from imperfective contexts, even if it is the case that the latter are marked by the present form in the learner's language system. Other authors dispute such a claim, suggesting that tense is acquired before aspect, with learners clearly marking past time contexts through a past tense form, albeit in a non-categorical, variable manner, while past tense

forms are not overextended to non-past time contexts (see Schlyter 1990; Dietrich et al. 1995) (we use 'time' to refer to the temporal period in which an event occurs, namely past, present or future, and 'tense' to refer to the different morphological forms that mark such temporal periods).

A further past time marker which has been the subject of some investigation is the pluperfect in English and its French equivalent, the *plus-que-parfait*, which are used in reverse-order reporting. For example, Bardovi-Harlig (1994) and Howard (2005) both report on the relatively limited use of the relevant forms to indicate events that are recounted outside of their chronological sequence, the order of which has been generally found to characterise learner narratives, reflecting Klein's Principle of Natural Order (see above). Notwithstanding, given the absence, or relatively minimal use of such forms, the learners are found to overuse other less appropriate forms in their place, in particular, the simple past or the *passé composé*. Similar to what has been observed at less advanced levels when other past time markers begin to emerge, however, the meaning of reverse-order can be inferred through pragmatic and lexical strategies. These strategies include the use of temporal adverbs and adverbials as well as subordination to signal the order of events, i.e. the use of adverbs and subordinating conjunctions like 'before' and its French equivalent 'avant'.

While perfective forms emerge before imperfective ones in past time contexts, a further key feature of the acquisition challenge concerns the linguistic variation underlying the use of different past time forms when they have emerged in the learner's language system. From this perspective, the focus is on the acquisition of the form-function relations holding in the target language which seem to pose considerable difficulty for the L2 learner. In particular, different past time markers carry different aspectual values, whereby the perspective that can be imposed on an event can vary, giving rise to several possible interpretations. In this regard, the considerable under- and over-use of each past time form has been the focus of extensive investigation with specific reference to the grammatical aspectual values of each past time form, inherent lexical aspect, narrative context, functional constraints and phonetic salience.

## 2.2 Grammatical aspect

In the case of the first factor, grammatical aspect, some studies have explored how various imperfective values are marked, namely the continuous, which can be further subdivided into the (non-)progressive in English, and the (non-)habitual. Such values differ from that of the perfective whereby the aspectual perspective imposed on the action is that of completedness. In this regard, Kihlstedt's (2002) work on L2 French is exemplary, showing that some imperfective values attract



use of the corresponding *imparfait* form before others. The pattern of emergence of this form across imperfective contexts in Kihlstedt's data from Swedish advanced learners is as follows: characterising value (continuous) > habitual > frequentative > progressive, where the distinction in values reflects the validity of the action within the timespan referred to. That is to say, in the case of the characterising value, the action is valid at all moments within the timespan (e.g. 'quand j'étais jeune, ma famille vivait en France' [when I was young, my family lived in France]). The habitual and frequentative values differ insofar as in the former case, the action is more of a repetitive nature, but nonetheless true of the time period (e.g. 'quand j'étais chez mon ami, on faisait du sport tout le temps' [when I was at my friend's house, we did sport the whole time]). In contrast, in the case of the frequentative value, the frequency of the action is more reduced giving rise to greater distance between the times at which the action is valid within the timespan referred to, such as 'quand j'étais jeune, j'étais en France de temps en temps' (when I was young, I used to be in France now and again). In the case of the progressive value of the *imparfait*, this refers in Kihlstedt's study to punctual actions that are captured as on-going through the imperfective lens of the *imparfait*, and as such, are not completed, such as in the case of 'atteindre' (to reach) or 'se rendre compte' (to realise). In sum, Kihlstedt's work highlights the role of the grammatical aspectual value, such as the different values of the *imparfait* outlined above, as a key factor which impacts the learner's use of the appropriate form in context. When the appropriate form is not used, the learners overuse either the *passé composé* or the present, with some imperfective values being particularly resistant to use of the *imparfait*.

In contrast to the well-known difficulty that imperfectivity poses in languages characterised by the (im)perfective distinction, perfectivity is seen as posing less of a challenge. The corresponding forms, such as the *passé composé* in French or the *préterito* in Spanish, tend to be produced to a greater extent. For example, various studies of L2 French show that learners have a greater tendency to use the *passé composé* to mark perfective and perfect (aorist) values, with greater variation evident in imperfective contexts where both the *passé composé* and the present are overused (see Harley 1992; Howard 2002; Kihlstedt 2002). While French does not distinguish between the perfective and perfect values morphologically, other languages, such as English, do. In this case, the present perfect as a marker of the perfect value underlying the relation between the event and the speech time, has also been the focus of analysis in some studies. Bardovi-Harlig (1997), for instance, notes the difficulty underlying the L2 use of this form, reflecting its status as a composed form involving a form of 'have' + past participle, which gives rise to its later emergence in L2 English compared to the simple past.

### 2.3 Inherent lexical aspect

Beyond grammatical aspect, a further factor that constrains the emergence and use of past time forms is that of inherent lexical aspect. This differs from grammatical aspect insofar as it is a universal property of verbs across languages in contrast with grammatical aspect which is more language-specific. That is to say, as we noted previously, languages differ in terms of the aspectual distinctions that they mark morphologically. In contrast, inherent lexical aspect relates to the underlying semantic value that a verb, or rather, verb predicate, has. This classic distinction is based on Vendler's (1967) work, where he distinguishes between four verb categories, namely stative, activity, accomplishment and achievement verbs. Stative verbs are – dynamic as they do not require energy to be realised, and are also durative as they do not inherently imply a temporal endpoint, e.g. 'live'. The other verbs, in contrast, are + dynamic. Activity verbs, such as 'run', share the durative quality with stative verbs, making them both atelic, in contrast with accomplishments and achievements which are deemed to be telic. Telic verbs necessarily imply a temporal endpoint, such as 'read a book' (accomplishment) or 'notice' (achievement). However, achievement verbs are punctual, unlike accomplishments which are durative, but inherently temporally bound.

In his Aspect Hypothesis, Andersen (1991) proposes that morphological markers do not emerge equally across verb types, but rather they initially emerge with one verb category before spreading to another. In the case of perfective forms, the pattern is: achievement > accomplishment > activity > stative, with imperfective forms hypothesized as evidencing the reverse pattern: stative > activity > accomplishment > achievement. In languages that have a progressive form, it is hypothesized that learners will not overextend this form to stative verbs such as in the case of English. In later articles, Andersen (1993; Andersen & Shirai 1995) proposes a number of principles that underlie such potential patterns of acquisition, such as the Relevance Principle, the One-to-One Principle and the Congruence Principle. In the former case, tense and agreement are seen to be less relevant to the meaning of the verb than aspect. With regard to the One-to-One Principle, learners are believed to have a preference to restrict one form to one particular semantic meaning. In the case of the Congruence Principle, learners' use of the past time markers is believed to reflect an effect for congruence in meaning between a particular marker and the underlying semantic meaning of a particular verb type, whereby the match in meaning is particularly close in some cases (such as between the prototypical features of perfective forms [+ past, + telic, + punctual, + result] and achievement verbs), and less so in others (such as between perfective forms and stative verbs insofar as they are – telic, – punctual, – result).



While the Aspect Hypothesis has probably been the most fruitful area of inquiry, with extensive studies of its application to L2 acquisition, it remains controversial given the divergence in findings across studies. In particular, some authors have tracked the past time forms in terms that might genuinely point to their gradual emergence across the verb categories, as Andersen would suggest. Others, notably Salaberry (2008), suggest that perfective markers constitute a default past time marker, at least in the initial stages of use. That is to say, forms such as the English simple past or the French *passé composé* are initially used across all verb categories and they do not seem to be constrained in their usage by verb class. Studies of other learners beyond the beginner level provide some evidence for the patterns suggested. Nevertheless, such patterns may relate less to the emergence of forms, that is to say acquisitional development, but rather, to patterns of use of the different forms across the different verb categories in the learner's language. In other words, some verb types tend to be used with a particular marker, whereas other verb types attract the use of an alternative marker. Indeed, not only do these patterns persist even at more advanced levels, but they are reinforced (see, for example, Bergström 1997; Howard 2002; Salaberry 2008). Moreover, studies that have included native speaker control groups demonstrate similar behaviours, raising the question of whether the learners are simply reflecting a distributional bias in the input, or a genuine effect for inherent lexical aspect (see, for example, Kihlstedt 2002; Hendriks 1999). Notwithstanding, the Aspect Hypothesis has provided an interesting way of conceptualising some of the difficulties that L2 learners demonstrate in their use of past time morphology. Their usage is certainly not a case of all or nothing where they might extend use of a particular morphological form to all verb types whenever required in context. Rather, certain combinations of verb type and morphological marker are more frequent in learner language. While Andersen suggests that this is based on the (a)telic distinction, L2 studies of Romance languages generally point to the stative/dynamic distinction as being more relevant. Perfective forms tend to be used with dynamic verbs to a far greater extent than stative verbs, if indeed such forms are found to occur with the latter verbs at all (see, for example, Bergström 1997; Howard 2002; Kihlstedt 2002). In contrast, imperfective forms are predominantly used with stative verbs. A further problem concerns the relevance of inherent lexical aspect to the learner's use of all past time forms, with some studies suggesting that verb type may only affect use of some markers, but not all (see, for example, Housen 2000).

Regardless of the problems identified, the Aspect Hypothesis has been a fruitful line of inquiry in relation to the role of inherent lexical aspect in the emergence and use of past time morphology in learner language. However, a number of other factors have also been identified. We present such factors in the following.



## 2.4 Factors constraining the L2 learner's variable use of TAM morphology

We first begin with the role of discourse ground in narrative discourse, as highlighted in the Discourse Hypothesis (see Bardovi-Harlig 1995). While events in the foreground advance the storyline at a temporal level, and therefore constitute the skeleton of the narrative, background information provides additional information surrounding the events in the foreground. It is hypothesized that L2 learners initially use aspectuo-temporal morphology based on the foreground/background distinction, similarly to native speakers (see, for example, Hopper 1979; Reinhart 1984). Studies such as Dietrich et al. (1995), Hendriks (1999), Bardovi-Harlig (1998) provide suitable evidence. Bardovi-Harlig (1998) also looks at the potential contradictory effects of the Aspect and Discourse Hypotheses. The Aspect Hypothesis suggests that verb types are not marked equally, but rather attract the use of different inflectional markers depending on their inherent lexical aspect. The Discourse Hypothesis proposes that verbs differ in their marking depending on their discourse function. Bardovi-Harlig (1998) explores how one hypothesis may override the other in contexts where the two hypotheses make mutually exclusive predictions. Bardovi-Harlig's work provides evidence for the dual effect of both hypotheses insofar as they appear to interact. While there is an effect for grounding, there is also an effect for inherent lexical aspect, with the verb categories not being equally marked with a particular form within each discourse ground (for a study of such interaction between linguistic factors in the case of L2 French, see Howard 2002).

A somewhat lesser investigated area in the case of L2 temporality research concerns the Functionalist Hypothesis. The Functionalist Hypothesis' claim is that L2 learners may not apply a morphological form when another linguistic marker may serve the same function in a context given the redundancy of such double marking (see Young 1991). In particular, temporal adverbs and adverbials are a useful area to investigate such a question. While studies are few, those that do exist point to the importance of such non-morphological lexical means at lower levels of proficiency (see, for example, Noyau 1990). Bardovi-Harlig (1992) also notes a correlation between the frequency of such lexical devices and that of morphological markers of past time, whereby with increased use of verb morphology, the learners reduce their use of the lexical markers of time. In later work on other temporal categories, namely the expression of reverse order through the use of the pluperfect in English, Bardovi-Harlig (1994) hypothesizes that L2 learners go through various phases of such lexical and pragmatic strategies for marking different temporal domains, even in the case of morphological forms that are seen as emerging late, such as the pluperfect. That is to say, not only do such lexical and pragmatic devices characterise the early acquisition of some aspectuo-temporal

concepts, but they are also evident in more advanced learners during their acquisition of other concepts that are acquired late.

A final hypothesis in the case of the use of past time forms concerns Wolfram's (1985) Principle of Phonetic Salience which suggests an effect for verb (ir)regularity whereby irregular forms are more salient in the input than regular forms, and therefore emerge first in the learner's language system. A number of studies provide supporting evidence, such as Adamson et al. (1996), Dietrich et al. (1995) and Salaberry (2000). Adamson et al. (1996) find that suppletive forms such as 'go' vs. 'went' in L2 English are first marked for past time compared to irregular forms that entail only an internal vowel change, such as 'come' vs. 'came'. Dietrich et al. (1995) suggest a 'mimicking' effect for the input, whereby the phonetic salience surrounding irregular forms in the input makes them more noticeable to the learner.

While the hypotheses that we have briefly presented point in some way to the complexity of factors that might condition the emergence and subsequent use of aspectuo-temporal morphology in a second language, they have been the subject of extensive inquiry from different theoretical perspectives, ranging from form- and concept-oriented approaches (see Bardovi-Harlig, this volume), to generative, functionalist and variationist paradigms. While variationist studies of L2 aspectuo-temporal marking are few, they have been especially insightful in capturing the multiple factors that are simultaneously at play. For example, in a study of /t/-/d/ deletion on simple past forms in L2 English by Chinese learners in the US, Bayley's (1996) variationist study illuminates the relative weighting in a Varbrul analysis of the various factors which constrain the learners' choice of aspectuo-temporal marker.

Research on past time reference has drawn on both form- and concept-oriented approaches to explore TAM morphological marking in the learner's production using different tasks, such as film retells (see Labeau 2005), narratives (see Dietrich et al. 1995), general conversations (see Howard 2002; Kihlstedt 2002). Other work within a UG paradigm has focused on comprehension and interpretation issues using tasks such as grammatical judgement tests, multiple choice tests and cloze tests. Such work is exemplified in various studies by Silvina Montrul and Roumyana Slabakova on L2 Spanish and English within a Minimalist paradigm drawing on grammaticality judgement tests and truth value judgement tasks (see, for example, Slabakova & Montrul 2002; Montrul & Slabakova 2002). Their work generally points to the fact that advanced and near-native learners can be successful in their acquisition of tense-aspect morphology, with a developmental trend emerging across proficiency levels. While learners distinguish their morphological use between the different verb types outlined above in relation to the Aspect Hypothesis, they gradually increase their interpretative ability to differentiate semantic features as they become more proficient. A further study within a UG



framework by Ayoun (2005) also shows that her L2 French learner-participants produce only a small number of errors across verb types. However, the learners differ from the native speaker control group whereby the latter demonstrate a wider range of morphological forms across the different verb classes. The author concludes that the learners “still have not acquired the more subtle semantic distinctions associated with AspP” (p. 123).

Taken together, the diversity of approaches mentioned above allows complementary insights into the acquisition of past time in a second language. As Slabakova (2002) indicates, there is an ‘embarrassment of riches’ given the extensive studies available which have explored different target languages across learners at different levels of proficiency and in different learning contexts, and have drawn on an extensive range of tasks (see for example the collection of papers in Salaberry & Comajoan 2013 for discussion of task issues in tense-aspect research, as well as Bardovi-Harlig 2000, 2005 for discussion of the limitations of certain tasks for the elicitation of some aspectuo-temporal forms). While the focus has predominantly been on past time, some studies have explored other morphological forms and functions.

## 2.5 Acquisition and use of TAM verb morphology: The expression of futurity and modality

Other morphological forms have concerned, for example, the expression of the future where the learner must grapple with multiple future-tense forms, and the expression of modality such as through the use of the subjunctive in L2 French and the conditional, as well as the acquisition of modal verbs, such as ‘could’ and ‘should’. If the forms under investigation within these semantic domains have been only more recently investigated, it is perhaps reflective of the late emergence of such forms in the learner’s tense-aspect system.

In the case of futurity, this conceptual domain has been especially interesting given the variation underlying the use of multiple future time morphological forms in target languages such as English and French. For example, in English, forms include ‘will’, a periphrastic form with ‘going to’, the present futurate, and the future progressive (see Bardovi-Harlig 2004a, 2004b). Similarly, in French, there is a choice between the inflected future, the periphrastic future, and the present futurate (see for example, Ayoun 2013; Howard 2012; Edmonds & Gudmestad 2015). As Poplack and Turpin (1999) outline, it remains controversial whether the use of such forms is semantically constrained in the target language, with one particular form performing a particular semantic function, or whether there is an overlap between their usage insofar as either form can be used within a particular semantic context, such as to express near future as opposed to distal future, or