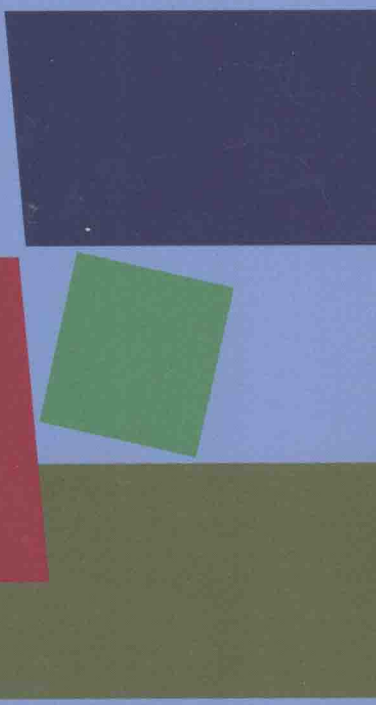
The Second Language Acquisition of French Tense, Aspect, Mood and Modality

Dalila Ayoun



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The Second Language Acquisition of French Tense, Aspect, Mood and Modality

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Preface

> *"...aspect is expressed in English by all kinds of idiomatic turns, rather than by a consistently worked out set of grammatical forms".*
>
> Sapir (1921:108)

The study of tense, aspect and mood/modality has been a very productive area of research from a variety of theoretical and applied perspectives because, as noted elsewhere (e.g. Ayoun & Salaberry 2005; de Saussure, Moeschler & Puskás 2009; Salaberry 2008), it is relevant to so many areas of inquiry – syntax, morphology, semantics, discourse/pragmatics – as well as to the integration of information across the interfaces formed by each one of these domains. Temporal-aspectual systems have thus a great potential of informing our understanding of the developing competence of second language (L2) learners. However, the vast majority of empirical studies investigating L2 acquisition have largely focused on past temporality (e.g. Ayoun 2001, 2004, 2005a; Bardovi-Harlig 2000; Granda 2004; Salaberry 2008), neglecting the acquisition of the expression of the present and future temporalities with rare exceptions (e.g. Benati 2001; Wiberg 2002 for L2 Italian) aside from ESL (English as a second language) learners (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig 2004a, 2004b, 2005; Salsbury 2000), leaving unanswered the question of how the investigation of different types of temporality may inform our understanding of the acquisition of temporal, aspectual and mood systems as a whole.

Investigating the L2 acquisition of different temporalities adds another dimension because their expressions also encompass the various modalities such as the deontic and epistemic modalities. Thus, investigating how L2 learners express various temporalities (past, present, future), aspects (perfective, imperfective, progressive) and moods (indicative, subjunctive, conditional) will expand the empirical inquiry from the domain of tense-aspectual systems to the tense-aspect-mood/modality (TAM) systems, providing a much more complete picture of the developing competence of L2 learners.

Although the concepts of tense-aspect and mood/modality are presented in different chapters for ease of exposition, as it will become clear, some overlap will be unavoidable since these concepts are inextricably linked.

This monograph is organized as follows: Chapters 1 and 2 present a descriptive account of TAM in French and English from a Minimalist perspective; Chapter 3 introduces the current theoretical assumptions for the acquisition of TAM systems

from a generative/minimalist perspective, while Chapter 4 is a non-exhaustive review of the generative and non-generative literature in the acquisition of TAM systems in French; new empirical data from English-speaking learners of French in an instructed setting are presented in Chapter 5; pedagogical applications based on our empirical findings are proposed in Chapter 6, while Chapter 7 summarizes the contents of each chapter and suggests directions for future research.

Although no single monograph could address all current empirical and theoretical questions in L2 acquisition, the objective of the present monograph is threefold: (a) to contribute to the already impressive body of research in the L2 acquisition of tense, aspect and mood/modality from a generative perspective, and in so doing to present a more complete picture of the processes of L2 acquisition in general; (b) to bridge the gap between linguistic theory and L2 acquisition; (c) to make empirical findings more accessible to language instructors by proposing concrete pedagogical applications.

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CHAPTER 1

Tense, temporality and aspect

Le temps a-t-il seulement un sens, n'est-ce pas plutôt une durée qui, elle, cerne le temps, l'immobilise et lui apporte une valeur?

Jacques Lamarche

1.1 Introduction: The concepts of time, tense and aspect

From a linguistic perspective, the concept of time is expressed with the two distinct grammatical categories of tense and aspect. It is interesting to note that in French, both the concept of time and the grammatical category of tense are expressed with the same word *le temps*; the contrast between the singular and plural forms of determiners (e.g. *le vs. les* 'the') is necessary to distinguish between the concepts of time (*le temps*) and tense (*les temps*).

Tense is a deictic category that "relates the time of the situation referred to some other time, usually to the moment of speaking" (Comrie 1976: 1–2), whereas aspect represents the "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (Comrie 1976: 3). Thus, tense orders events along a timeline, situating them in reference to others (i.e. past, present, future, or before, at the same time or later), whereas aspect reflects the speaker's internal perspective on a given situation, which is why it is also referred to as viewpoint (i.e. perfective for completed, imperfective for incomplete, and progressive for an event which is still in progress).[1] As a verbal inflection, tense is a morphological category, but it is also an important syntactic category, particularly within the framework of generative grammar adopted in this monograph.

As illustrated by Figure 1.1, aspect is further divided into two distinct categories: grammatical aspect and lexical aspect.

Grammatical aspect is concerned with the internal temporal constituency of a given situation, not with its external temporal points of reference. It is expressed through morphological markers. For instance, the main aspectual distinction that French makes between perfective aspect and imperfective aspect is realized

1. Perfective comes from Latin *perfectus* 'accomplished'.

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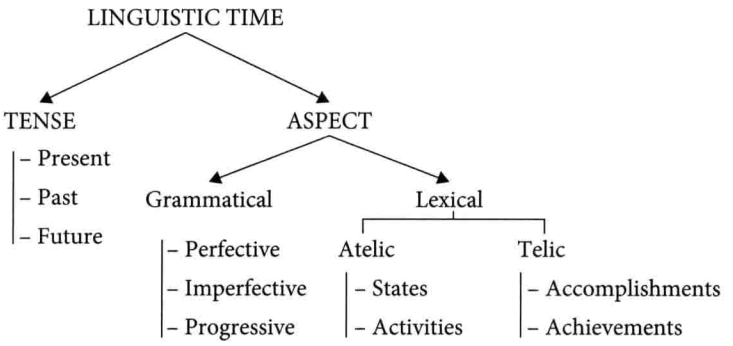

Figure 1.1. Grammatical and lexical aspects

through the inflectional morphology of the *passé composé/passé simple* and the *imparfait*, respectively (e.g. Smith 1991/1997). The perfective aspect focuses on the beginning and the end of a situation, while the imperfective aspect focuses on the situation from within, without definite temporal boundaries, as illustrated by the following sentences:

(1) a. *Paul a écrit une lettre à ses parents.*
Paul write-PERF a letter to his parents
'Paul wrote a letter to his parents'

b. *Paul écrivait une lettre à ses parents.*
Paul write-IMP a letter to his parents
'Paul was writing a letter to his parents'

As we will see below in greater details, (1a, b) illustrate two different past tense markings: the same predicate *écrire* 'to write' is encoded with the *passé composé* in (1a) to indicate that the action of writing a letter is viewed as completed (i.e. Paul started to write a letter and was able to finish writing it within a specific temporal frame such as the afternoon); whereas in (1b), encoding the predicate with the *imparfait* conveys that the action is viewed as incomplete (i.e. Paul started to write a letter but did not finish writing it for some reason: he was interrupted by someone or stopped to attend to another task). Thus, Langacker (1982:274) contends that "a perfective predicate describes the change of a configuration through time", whereas "an imperfective predicate describes the constancy of configuration through time". Similarly, Caudal and Roussarie (2005:267–268) argue that the perfective focuses on changes of state, whereas the imperfective addresses the permanence of the state in the world.

English is said to be limited to two tense forms: past and present (or past and nonpast referring to present and future time) and its main aspectual distinction

is between the perfective and the progressive, although a more detailed account would include four aspects: simple (or imperfective), perfect (or perfective), progressive and perfect progressive as shown in Table 1.1 (adapted from Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999: 110):

Table 1.1. The English tense-aspect system

		Aspect			
		Simple	**Perfective**	**Progressive**	**Perfect progressive**
Tense	past	talked	had talked	was/were talking	had been talking
	present	talk/talks	has/have talked	is/are talking	has/have been talking
	future	will talk	will have talked	will be talking	will have been talking

Table 1.1 includes future in the tense axis to present a complete picture of the various tense-aspect combinations in English.

Lexical aspect or *Aktionsart*[2] refers to the inherent semantic property of the verb phrase or predicate. Most of the literature on tense-aspect has adopted Andersen's (1991) description of the well-known Vendler-Mourelatos hierarchy (Mourelatos 1978; Vendler 1967) to propose the following aspectual categories: (1) prototypical states refer to situations which do not involve change over time, do not have salient endpoints or gaps, are non-volitional, and do not require any input of energy (cf. Binnick 1991; Comrie 1985) (e.g. 'to know something'); (2) Activities are dynamic situations which involve change over time, but lack a specific endpoint (e.g. 'to swim'); (3) Accomplishments are dynamic situations which have a certain duration and include an end result (e.g. 'to paint the house'); (4) Achievements refer to dynamic situations which involve an instantaneous change (e.g. 'to realize something').

Achievements and accomplishments are also said to be telic to convey that they have an inherent outcome or endstate, whereas states and activities are said to be atelic to indicate that they lack such an inherent outcome or endstate. Two additional lexical aspectual distinctions oppose stative (states) to dynamic (activities), and punctual (achievements) to durative (accomplishments) (e.g. Andersen 1991). The semantic features of these aspectual distinctions in association with lexical aspectual values are summarized in Table 1.2.

2. The word *Aktionsart* means literally 'kind of action'. Its origins are traced back to Aristotle who distinguished between *enérgeia* (incomplete movement) and *kíne:sis* (complete movement) as referring to the two basic types of situation found in our natural environment (Verkuyl 1993: 43).

Table 1.2. Semantic features of aspectual categories

	States	Activities	Accomplishments	Achievements
punctual	–	–	–	+
telic	–	–	+	+
dynamic	–	+	+	+

Table 1.2 shows that aspectual classes can be distinguished by a single semantic feature: activities and accomplishments are distinguished by the [±telic] feature, while the distinction between accomplishments and achievements is established by the [±punctual] feature, and the [±dynamic] feature separates states and activities.

Some researchers distinguish more lexical classes, whereas others recognize fewer. Thus, semelfactives (activity verbs denoting single action events such as *wink, wave, jump* or *knock*) are added by combining the feature [+instantaneous] with the feature [+telic] in the classification proposed by Smith (1991/1997), while eliminating durativity as a relevant semantic feature combines accomplishments and achievements into a single class (Dowty 1986; Mourelatos 1981; Ramsay 1990; Salaberry 1998, 2000a).

The use of lexical aspectual classes as a theoretical framework to analyze the development of verbal morphology among second language (L2) learners was pioneered in Andersen (1986, 1991) and became known as the Aspect Hypothesis.[3] As we will see in Chapter 4, the Aspect hypothesis is the theoretical proposal that has generated the largest body of L2 empirical research among instructed learners so far.

1.2 Past temporality and aspect

French and English exhibit two different tense and aspectual systems: French relies on tense, periphrastic tenses and time adverbials, while English uses tense, modals, *have* and time adverbials.[4] Thus, both languages use morphological means (tense marking), lexical means (time adverbials plus modals in English) and syntactic means (periphrastic tenses) to express past temporality.

3. The Aspect hypothesis is also known as the Lexical Aspect hypothesis, the Primacy of Aspect hypothesis (e.g. Robison 1990, 1995), or the Redundant Marking Hypothesis (e.g. Shirai & Kurono 1998); there are no principled differences between these terms, Aspect hypothesis is used in this monograph.

4. A periphrastic form is composed of an auxiliary and past participle as opposed to a single form bearing a verbal inflection (e.g. *j'aurais voulu* 'I would have like' *vs je voudrais* 'I would like').

The main past tenses in French are the *passé composé* (or indefinite past), *passé simple* (or definite past), *imparfait* and *plus-que-parfait*, as illustrated respectively by the following examples:

(2) a. *Estelle a acheté des livres.*
Estelle has bought-PERF some books
'Estelle bought books'

b. *Sophie acheta des livres.*
Sophie bought-PERF some books
'Sophie bought books'

c. *Marie achetait des livres.*
Marie bought-IMP some books
'Marie bought/was buying/would buy books'

d. *Anne avait acheté des livres.*
Anne had bought-PERF some books
'Anne had bought some books'

Both the *passé composé* in (2a) and the *passé simple* in (2b) are perfective past tenses, but the latter is more rare and typically limited to written contexts, to more elevated registers, or to refer to the historic past in oral contexts. The *passé simple* can express a punctual event as in (3a), an iterative event as in (3b) or a durative event as in (3c):

(3) a. *Paul sonna et entra sans attendre de réponse.*
Paul ring-PERF and walk in-PERF without wait answer
'Paul rang the bell and walked in without waiting for an answer'.

b. *Pour gagner sa vie, avant d'être célèbre, ce photographe*
To win his life, before be famous, this photographer
vendit des cartes postales.
sold-PERF postcards
'To make a living, before he became famous, this photographer was selling postcards'.

c. *Ne pouvant y croire, je demeurai prostré dans*
Not can it believe, I stayed-PERF prostrate in
mon fauteuil.
my armchair
'I couldn't believe it, so I stayed prostrated in my armchair'.

The *plus-que-parfait* in (1d) is also a perfective past tense that always refers to a point further back in time than a predicate encoded at the *passé composé* or the *imparfait*. The *imparfait* in (1c) is an imperfective past tense that also expresses iterative and durative semantic aspectual values (see Ayoun 2004 for an empirically-based

distinction, following Kaplan 1987), whereas the *passé composé* embodies only the perfective. By definition, the imperfective is understood as being nonperfective as in (4b):

(4) a. *Attila a choisi les meilleures photos.*
Attila has selected the best photos
'Attila selected the best photos'.

b. *Attila choisissait les meilleures photos.*
Attila select-IMP the best photos
'Attila selected the best photos'.

The action of selecting photos was completed in (4a), while it was still ongoing in (4b) and never completed. The iterative expresses habituality as in (5a, b):

(5) a. *Le samedi matin, ma grand-mère allait*
The Saturday morning, my grand-mother go-IMP
au marché.
to the market
'On Saturday mornings, my grand-mother would go to the market'.

b. *Charlotte voyageait toujours seule.*
Charlotte travel-IMP always alone
'Charlotte would always travel by herself'.

Note that it is the phrase *le samedi matin* that expresses habituality in (5a); its omission would give the predicate a perfective reading and the verb would have to be encoded at the *passé composé* (*samedi matin, ma grand-mère est allée au marché*).

On other hand, the durative is most often used with stative or activity predicates as in (6):

(6) a. *Nous ne voulions pas partir parce qu'il pleuvait*
We neg want-IMP NEG leave because it rain-IMP
très fort.
very strong
'We did not want to leave because it was raining very hard'.

b. *Elle dansait et adorait cela.*
She dance-IMP and love-IMP this
'She danced/was dancing and loved it'

The examples in (5) and (6) show that the *imparfait* may correspond to various forms in English such as the simple past or the past progressive. As a matter of fact, L2 learners have a tendency to erroneously equate the *imparfait* with the progressive in English which typically appears with non-stative predicates

which is not true for the *imparfait*, as illustrated with the following examples in (7a, b):

(7) a. *Marthe a vécu à Paris.*
Martha has lived at Paris
'Martha lived in Paris'

b. *Marthe vivait à Paris.*
Martha lived-IMP at Paris
'Martha was living in Paris'

According to Smith (1997: 200), the example in (7a) presents a closed situation, in contrast with the example in (7b) which introduces a situation that may or may not still be open, whereas the *imparfait* in (6b) does not have or imply any type of activity or temporary status.

Standard English main past tenses are the simple past, the past progressive, and the past perfect as illustrated in (8a), (8b) and (8c), respectively:

(8) a. The players practiced all week.
b. The players were practicing all week.
c. The players had practiced all week.

The main past tense forms in French and English are summarized in Tables 1.3 and 1.4.

Table 1.3. Past Tense morphology in French

Tense	Morphological encoding	Example
passé composé. (PC)	auxiliary *avoir/être* present + past participle	*j'ai, tu as, il/elle/on a, nous avons, vous avez, ils/elles ont travaillé*
passé simple. (PS)	verb + inflectional endings	*je travaillai, tu travaillas, il/elle/on travailla, nous travaillâmes, vous travaillâtes, ils/elles travaillèrent*
imparfait. (IMP)	verb + inflectional endings	*je travaillais, tu travaillais, il/elle/on travaillait, nous travaillions, vous travailliez, ils/elles travaillaient*
plus-que-parfait. (PQP)	auxiliary *avoir/être* imparfait + past participle	*j'avais, tu avais, il/elle/on avait, nous avions, vous aviez, ils/elles avaient travaillé*
past progressive. (PastProg)	auxiliary être + en train de + nonfinite verb	*j'étais en train de travailler*
passé antérieur	auxiliary *avoir/être passé simple* + past participle	*quand j'eus fini de travailler, je m'offris un cigare*

As illustrated with the examples above in (1a) and (1c), French distinguishes between the perfective aspect and the imperfective aspect as realized through

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