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A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF TENSE USE IN ENGLISH NEWS REPORT

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Abstract

Despite the extensive study of tense in fiction and oral narrative, the study of tense in English news report remains an almost uncharted territory. Moreover, conventional methodology for studying tense use in news texts is relatively inadequate in face of huge quantities of real-life data. To fill this gap, on the basis of Fleischman's theory of tense in narrative, the present study adopts a corpus-based approach and proposes a three-dimensional framework for analyzing tense use in individual text as well as in large quantities of data. The three dimensions are the choice of tense, verb category, and textual position. These three dimensions combine with each other to form three planes: tense-position plane, tense-verb plane, and verb-position plane. The three planes as well as a combined study of the three dimensions provide different angles to observe the use of tense in news report.

With the assistance of corpus techniques, the framework is applied to the self-compiled NYT corpus. First, studies of individual tense use along the three planes are conducted. On the tense-position plane, the general distribution of the tenses along textual positions reveals different distribution patterns for the tenses and special peaks in their distribution curve. The distribution of the present and present perfect follows a multi-peaked curve while there is a steady increase of preterit from the beginning to the end. On the tense-verb plane, Wordsmith 4.0 is used to calculate verbs associated with the present, preterit and present perfect. The calculated verbs are categorized into Vendler's four categories. The result shows that different tenses hold different attraction for different verb categories. Generally speaking, the present tense attracts state verbs; the past tense attracts achievement verbs; the present perfect prefers achievement and activity verbs. On the verb-position plane, the distribution of the four verb categories along textual positions shows striking similarities with the distribution trends of tenses. Combined study of the three planes then examines the functions of tense-verb constructions in different positions. The findings reveal that the present perfect keeps a stable association with the four verb categories throughout the news text. The present

tense shows variable association with verb categories. For example, in the 10%-19% position, the present tense's weight of association with achievement verb drops from 40.87% to 28.82%, while its weight of association with state verbs rises from 35.23% to 41.20% and activity verbs from 21.83% to 28.25%.

The findings from quantitative study are explained by qualitative analysis of concordances containing tense-verb constructions. Analysis of concordances reveals that tense-verb constructions have localized functions—within different textual positions, the tense-verb constructions take on various features and focus on different functions. These functions help explain the distribution tendencies and variations of tenses discovered through quantitative means.

The three-dimensional framework is then used to study tense patterns—the high-frequency co-occurrence of tenses within a span of two paragraphs. The statistically selected tense patterns go under a combined three-dimensional analysis to analyze the features of verbs used, their textual position, and their functions. Study of tense patterns reveals more structuring functions of tense. Of particular interest is the function of present perfect to introduce a new topic leading a sequence of preterits, to serve as a coda to end an episode following a sequence of preterits, to be used in sequence to narrate and to create climax. Present tense sequence also has journalistic application in news report—it can create the feature lead or mark journalistic interpretation. The pattern of alternation between present and past tense can blur the voices of news characters and the journalist and becomes a means for journalists to embed their own view into that of others. The study of tense pattern complements with that of individual tense use and discovers new functions of tense that is not directly observable to the latter.

The above findings are manifestations of the properties of tense-verb construction. On the basis of the findings on the functions of tense, a summary of the properties of tense-verb constructions at referential, textual, expressive and metalinguistic levels is presented, which broadens Fleischman's theoretical model by including verb category as well as the present perfect into the analysis. Meanwhile, the textual, expressive and metalinguistic functions of the three tenses are summarized.

The outcome of the present study proves the feasibility of the three-dimensional framework in discovering stylistic use of tense in news report. The quantitative findings and qualitative analyses of tense use point to important news values that shape news writing as well as the recent interpretive trend of news discussed in journalistic

community. Moreover, the study shows that the function of tense is closely associated with verb category as well as its textual position. The functions of tense are not confined to temporal references. Tenses serve important textual, expressive and metalinguistic functions. Tenses serve to structure discourse by foregrounding or backgrounding information, segmenting different threads of the news report or indicating the nature of the segment as narrative or non-narrative. The choice of a tense form is closely related to the pragmatics of the communicative situation, and to the pragmatics of the genre. All these findings help answer the question of "how tense is used" , broaden the theoretical analysis of tense, offer a new perspective to tense as well as news study, complement the current tense theory, and will contribute to future empirical or theoretical studies of tense and news.

中文摘要

尽管时态在小说或口头叙事中有大量研究，英语新闻报道中的时态研究却少有探索，而且，研究新闻文本时态使用，常规方法在面对海量数据时，会显得乏力。为了弥补这一不足，本研究基于佛莱什曼（Fleischman）的时态叙事理论，采用基于语料库的方法，提出时态分析三维框架，用于分析时态在新闻报道中的使用。框架的三个维度分别是：时态选择、（与时态相关的）动词类型、文本位置（时态或动词类型在文本中所处位置）。这三个维度两两组合，构成三个层面，它们与三维总体分析一起，提供了观察时态使用的不同视角。

借助语料库技术，三维框架用于分析自建《纽约时报》语料库。首先在三个分析层面研究单个时态的使用，有如下发现：在时态—文本位置层面，不同时态具有不同的文本分布模式，一般现在时和现在完成时呈多峰值分布，一般过去时从开始至结尾呈稳步上升趋势。在时态—动词层面，利用Wordsmith 4.0软件计算出与一般现在时、一般过去时和现在完成时关联的动词，并根据万德勒（Vendler）的分类将其分为四类动词，发现不同时态对不同动词类型有不同的吸引力，一般现在时吸引状态动词，一般过去时吸引成就动词，现在完成时偏好成就和活动动词。在动词—文本位置层面，四类动词类型的分布曲线与时态分布曲线非常相似，该发现从另一个侧面验证时态—动词研究中所揭示的时态与动词类型之间的吸引关系。最后，综合三个维度，分析时态—动词构式在不同文本位置的变化趋势，发现现在完成时与四类动词的结合使用在文本分布中保持相对稳定，一般现在时与动词类型的关联随文本位置不同而发生变化，在10%—19%文本位置，一般现在时与完成类动词的关联从40.87%降至28.82%，状态动词和行为类动词分别从35.23%升至41.20%，从21.83%升至28.25%。

上述定量分析所发现的时态的宏观特征，可以通过定性分析得到解释，时态—动词构式所在索引行分析表明，时态—动词构式在不同文本位置有不同的功能，这些不同功能累积构成其宏观层面的使用及分布特征，从而解释了定量分析的发现。

三维分析框架接下来用于时态聚合分析，即在两个段落范围内高频共现的时态连用。统计提取出的时态聚合，从三个维度进行分析，分析其动词特征、文本

位置及功能，发现了时态在谋篇方面的新功能。现在完成时常用于引导一系列过去时或者用于一系列过去时的结尾处，在该聚合中，现在完成时分别用于引出一个新的话题，标志话题结束。连用的现在完成时可用于分离两个故事，渲染高潮。一般现在时的连用也具有新闻特色，它可以标志新闻报道的特写式开头，或记者解读。一般现在时与一般过去时的交替使用是模糊记者声音和被引用者声音、记者悄悄嵌入自己的观点的一种手段。时态聚合分析与单个时态分析互相补充，可以发现后者不易发现或容易忽略的一些具体语篇功能。

上述发现是时态—动词构式的特性在具体使用中的体现，以所发现的时态功能为基础，本文总结了时态—动词构式在指称、文本、表达、元语言四个层面的特性，弥补佛莱什曼时态分析的不足，补充了佛莱什曼没有分析的现在完成时。同时，总结了在新闻报道中时态所发挥的文本、表达和元语言层面的功能。

本研究取得的结果证明，三维时态分析框架，为时态分析提供了一个可行的具体可操作的分析框架，并且揭示了新闻报道中时态使用的新闻文体特征。定量和定性分析发现的时态使用特征和功能，侧面反映了影响新闻写作的新闻价值观，为新闻界提出的解释性新闻报道的近期兴起提供了数据支持。本研究显示，时态的功能与动词类型、时态所处文本位置密不可分。时态不仅局限于指涉时间，而且发挥重要的文本、表达、元语言功能。时态可用于突显或背景化相关信息、分割新闻报道中的不同主线副线，或者标志叙事性或非叙事性文本。时态使用与其所在语篇，乃至其所属的体裁（genre）密不可分。这些发现从实证的视角回答了时态使用的问题，进一步增加了对时态的理解，为时态使用和新闻研究提供了新视角，完善了现有的时态理论，为将来的时态研究指出了一条新的研究路径。

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning	Page
BROWN	The Brown University Standard Corpus of Present-Day American English	23
CONTCORP	The corpus of contemporary English	23
FLOB	The Freiburg-LOB Corpus of British English	23
FROWN	The Freiburg-Brown corpus of American English	23
HISTCORP	The corpus of earlier English	23
HP	Historical Present	12
LOB	THE Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus	23
Pr	The present tense	92
PrP	The present perfect	92
SP	The simple past tense	23,92
TEM	Textual, Expressive and Metalinguistic	9

Chapter 1 Introduction

[J]ournalists do not write articles. They write stories. [...] Journalists are professional story-tellers of our age. The fairy tale starts: "Once upon a time". The news story begins: "Fifteen people were injured today when a bus plunged ..." (Bell, 1991: 147).

1.1 Background of the research

The study of temporal relationships in the text of novels has been one of the most popular research areas in stylistics and narrative theory. Interest in the temporal relationships in narrative has led to extensive research on the use of tense in narrative. The study of tense in fiction or natural conversation is based on a functional text-linguistic framework and constitutes a major advance over earlier approaches to tense (Uspensky, 1973; Casparis, 1975; Wolfson, 1978, 1979, 1982; Schiffrin, 1981; Prince, 1982; Osselton, 1982; Fleischman, 1990; Fludernik, 2003; Linhares-Dias, 2006; Harvey, 2006; Currie, 2009). These studies reveal that tense in narrative texts fulfils a variety of functions, not all of which are temporal or aspectual (Wolfson, 1978, 1979, 1982; Hopper, 1979a, 1979b; Hopper & Thompson, 1980; Schiffrin, 1981; Chvany, 1984; Reinhart, 1984; Fludernik, 1991, 1992, 2003). Following a similar line of research, the present study will carry out a corpus-based analysis of tense use in newspaper, focusing on the distribution, characteristics and functions of tenses in hard news report as well as how this contributes to effective news reporting.

The study of tense in narrative lays foundation for the present study in that the concepts and method can be adopted in journalistic discourse analysis. It paves the way for the analysis of the functions of tense in news report, complementing the traditional study that focuses on the semantics of tense.

In corpus linguistics, since the advent of large-scale corpus studies, there has been a considerable amount of research on collocation patterns, especially of lexical items and phraseology (Sinclair, 1991; Hoey, 1991; Stubbs, 2001; Biber, 2006; Hunston, 2010). There has also been an increasing use of corpus data in various fields of application (e.g.

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