

## Narrative Structure and Distribution of Verbal Morphology in the Interlanguage of Thai Learners of English

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### **Abstract**

*Describing learners' systematic variation in tense use, the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis predicts that language learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground and background in narratives (Bardovi-Harlig, 1994, p.43). Testing this hypothesis, the present study investigates whether Thai EFL learners exhibit different rates of use of past tense in the foreground and background of their narratives. It was found that, in both oral and written narratives of the learners, rates of use of past tense are greater in foreground than background. Unlike native speakers who show a high use of past tense equally in foreground and background, the learners tend to employ past tense in the foreground while using non-past forms with essential competition between the present simple and base forms in the background. The study provides empirical support to the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis and sheds light on the difficulty experienced by L2 learners in acquiring the L2 tense system.*

### **1. Introduction**

The acquisition of the L2 tense system has received much attention for a long time and research in this area has offered many important findings. One of the findings, as captured by the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis, is that language learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground and background in narratives (Bardovi-Harlig, 1994, p.43). For the last two decades, several studies have been conducted to examine the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis. The studies, however, have largely investigated learners whose L1 is a [+tense] language or a group of learners with mixed [-tense] and [+tense] L1 background.<sup>1</sup> Whether a homogeneous group of [-tense] L1 speakers' use of verbal morphology conforms to the Discourse Hypothesis was left relatively uninvestigated.

It is important, however, to examine the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis by investigating a homogeneous group of [-tense] L1 speakers. Research reports on the acquisition of tense have made reference to the possibility of L1 influence as a contributing factor to the observed language behavior (Bayley, 1994, Flashner, 1989,

Giacalone, Ramat & Banfi, 1990, Shirai & Kurono, 1998, Collins, 2002). The absence of tense inflection in L1 may cause the learners to acquire L2 tense system in a manner different from learners whose L1 has tense inflection (Yang & Huang, 2004). Therefore, it is worth investigating a homogeneous group of [-tense] L1 speakers, in addition to learners whose L1 is a [+tense] language or a group of learners with mixed [-tense] and [+tense] L1 background.

As Thai is a [-tense] language, the present study examines the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis by investigating distribution of verbal morphology in narratives produced by 30 Thai EFL learners and a control group of 10 native speakers of English. Contributing to the body of research on the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis, this study shed light on the difficulty experienced by L2 learners in acquiring L2 tense system.

The remaining portions of this article are organized into 4 sections. In section 2, I summarize previous studies related to expression of temporality, narrative structure, and influence of narrative structure on distribution of verbal morphology. Then in section 3, I report on the present study. Findings of the study are presented and discussed in section 4. Finally in section 5, I state the conclusion of the article by discussing some of the implications of the results and directions for future research.

## **2. Previous studies**

### *2.1 Expression of temporality in Thai and English*

According to Bardovi-Harlig (2000), two concepts crucial to the study of expression of temporality are tense and aspect. Tense “places an event on a time line, relevant to the time of speech (past, present, future)” (Reichenbach, 1947). Aspect represents the “different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie, 1976, p.3). Although tense and aspect are usually interpreted with respect to a verb phrase in a sentence, languages may vary in ways in which tense and aspect are expressed.

In English, tense and aspect are inseparably encoded in verbal inflectional morphology. To illustrate, consider the sentences in (1) and (2).

- (1) John *read* the entire book.
- (2) He *drank* wine.

The verbs “read” and “drank” are marked for past tense and simultaneously perfective aspect or imperfective aspect. In (1), as the reading of a book is viewed as an event in its entirety, including both its initial and final endpoints, (1) expresses

the perfective aspect. In (2), the events of drinking wine is viewed as an event including neither its initial nor final endpoints so (2) expresses the imperfective aspect. English, therefore, expresses tense and aspect via verbal inflectional morphology, and hence is a [+tense] language.

Unlike English, Thai is an isolating language with no verbal inflectional morphology. While temporal locations of events are indicated by context clues and lexical expressions (e.g., yesterday, last year, the next day, etc.), Thai has a number of aspect markers occurring both pre-verbally and post-verbally. Pre-verbal aspect makers are the existential/experiential perfect marker *khoey*, the continuative marker *yang* and the progressive marker *khamlang*. Post-verbal aspect markers are the imperfective marker *yuu* and the perfect/perfective marker *laew* (Visonyangoon 2000). Thai, therefore, does not morphologically express tense or aspect, and is considered to be a [-tense] language.<sup>2</sup>

Since English and Thai differ in their realization of tense-aspect, the question then arises as to whether findings from previous studies, in which L1 and L2 do not differ in the way that Thai and English do, account for Thai learners' development of an English tense-aspect system? One of the findings, as captured by the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis, is that language learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground and background in narratives (Bardovi-Harlig, 1994, p.43). It is interesting, therefore, to examine the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis by investigating a homogeneous group of Thai EFL learners. In the following section, as background material for the present study, I will provide a review of previous studies on narrative structure and its influence on distribution of verbal morphology.

## 2.2 Narrative structure

The definition of a "narrative" has varied through the course of studies on the topic. In linguistic studies, a narrative is considered to be a text in which "the speaker relates a series of real or fictive events in the order in which they took place" (Dahl, 1984, p. 116). A narrative usually consists of both clauses that narrate the main events and clauses that provide supportive material elaborating on the main events. The former is referred to as a foreground clause while the latter is referred to as a background clause. Universally, the foreground and background make up narrative structure (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000, p.279).

Characteristics of foreground and background have been discussed in several studies including Hopper (1979) and Dry (1983). According to Hopper (1979), the

foreground relates to events belonging to the skeletal structures of the discourse. The background, however, is not involved in the narration of main events, but provides supportive material which elaborates on or evaluates the events in the foreground. Events reported in foreground clauses are understood to be sequential, whereas background events are often out of sequence with respect to the foreground and to other background events.

Dry (1983) also draws a distinction between foreground and background. According to Dry, a distinction between foreground and background has to do with information value. The information communicated in the foreground clause must be new rather than given. To illustrate, consider (1) and (2).

(1) (a) John gave Mary an apple, (b) and she sat down **to take** a bite.

(c) She took the bite deliberately, savoring the taste.

(2) (a) John gave Mary an apple, (b) and she sat down **and took** a bite.

(c) She took the bite deliberately, savoring the taste.

(as cited in Bardovi-Harlig 2000, p. 282).

In (1), clause (c) presents ordered new information whereas in (2), it elaborates on information already presented in (b). Consequently, clause (c) in (1) is foreground, whereas in (2), it is not. According to Dry, as foreground clauses provide new information, foreground clauses can be said to move time forward.

In summary, background and foreground differ in several respects. In the present study, determination of grounding (foreground clauses VS background clauses) will be based on Hopper's (1979) and Dry's (1983) ideas of foreground background characteristics.

### *2.3 Influence of narrative structure on distribution of verbal morphology*

Earlier research into interlanguage narratives has shown that narrative grounding influences distribution of verbal morphology. However, the earlier research has focused on narratives produced by learners whose L1 is a [+tense] language or a group of learners with mixed [-tense] and [+tense] L1 background, leaving a homogeneous group of [-tense] L1 speakers as a relatively uninvestigated group of learners.

To begin with, examining narratives produced by a Japanese learner of English, Kumpf (1984) found that the learner used the base form of the verb to express completed action in the foreground, and morphologically marked background verbs with tense and aspect. Flashner (1989), on the other hand, examined oral narratives

produced by three Russian learners of English. Flashner found that the learners marked foreground verbs with the simple past while using base forms in the background. In another study, Bardovi-Harlig (1992) compared how native speakers and learners of English differed in their use of tense-aspect markers with respect to narrative structure. Examining oral and written narratives produced by 16 intermediate learners of English (8 speakers of Arabic, 2 speakers of Spanish, 2 speakers of Korean, 2 speakers of Chinese, and 2 speakers of Japanese), she found that the majority of the learners distinguished foreground from background by employing simple past tense in the foreground and present simple tense or base forms in the background. Native speakers, in contrast, do not rely primarily on narrative grounding when using past marking.

Although the studies conducted by Kumpf (1984), Flashner (1989), and Bardovi-Harlig (1992) revealed different distribution of verbal morphology across grounding, these studies also revealed that a relationship exists between narrative grounding and interlanguage verbal morphology. Stating clearly the relationship between narrative grounding and interlanguage verbal morphology, Bardovi-Harlig (1994) proposed the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis which asserts that “language learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground and background in narratives” (p.43).

Then, to account for the apparently contradictory results regarding distributions of verbal across grounding, Bardovi-Harlig (1995) claimed that the contradictory findings resulted from the level of proficiency of the learners. According to her, as learners continually develop their tense system (from low proficiency learners with inaccurate use of tense-aspect to high proficiency learners with native-like use of tense), at each stage of development (or level of proficiency) they may exhibit differential uses of verbal morphology relative to narrative grounding.

To address in particular how second language proficiency affects use of tense-aspect morphology with respect to narrative structure, Bardovi-Harlig's (1995) examined 37 written and oral narrative pairs produced in a film retell task by Spanish, Arabic, Korean, Taiwanese, and Japanese learners of English. In this study, she divided learners into 7 groups according to the frequency of their appropriate use of the past. The results of this study show that tense-aspect morphology in interlanguage is influenced by narrative structure. The foreground shows greater rates of use of simple past than background in both oral and written narratives and across levels. The dominant forms of foreground and background, however, change as the tense-

aspect system is acquired. After an early stage of development in which nonpast is favored in both foreground and background, learners mark foreground events for simple past first and use a variety of forms in the background, progressing toward a more native-like distribution with increasing proficiency. Her study, therefore, clarifies the relationship between second language proficiency and the influence of narrative structure on tense-aspect distribution.

To summarize, investigating how the use of temporal morphology by learners whose L1 is a [+tense] language or a group of learners with mixed [-tense] and [+tense] L1 background is influenced by narrative structure, the previous studies support the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis. However, whether a homogeneous group of [-tense] L1 speakers' use of verbal morphology conforms to the Discourse Hypothesis is still left uninvestigated.

### **3. The present study**

#### *3.1 Research Question and Hypothesis*

The present study is conducted as a preliminary study. Examining the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis, this study investigates whether Thai EFL learners exhibit different rates of use of past tense in the foreground and background of their narratives. Based on Bardovi-Harlig's (1992, 1994, 1995) studies, it is hypothesized that the learners show different rates of use of past tense in the foreground and background of their narratives.

#### *3.2 Participants*

Participants in this study were undergraduate students at a Thai university in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. They speak Thai as L1 and have learned English in a classroom setting for at least 10 years before being recruited for the present study. Rather than general English proficiency, selection of the participants was based on overall rates of appropriate use of past morphology in the participants' narratives. The rationale, according to Bardovi-Harlig (1995), was that grouping learners according to their appropriate use of tense eliminates less relevant variables (i.e., other linguistic and academic skills) and facilitates the comparison of learners on the single relevant variable of development to tense.

Each narrative was first coded for use of a past form in past-time contexts, which included simple past, past progressive, and past perfect. Rates of past use were calculated for verb types rather than tokens. As a result, the participants were

divided into 3 groups according to the percentage of appropriate use of past morphology by a division of 30%, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Selection of participants**

	<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>
Percentage of appropriate use of past morphology	10-39%	40-69%	70-99%
N	18	30	16

In this preliminary study, only 30 students belonging to the middle section (Group 2, showing 40-69% of appropriate use of past morphology) were selected. Additionally, 10 native speakers of English were included as a control group.

### 3.3 Instrument

Employing silent film as an elicitation procedure, this study used an eight-minute excerpt entitled “Alone and Hungry” from the silent film *Modern Times*. According to Bardovi-Harlig (2000), the excerpt is ideal for examining the encoding for tense/aspect morphology and backgrounding as it consists of a series of discrete, easily identifiable action sequences, simultaneous action, and changes of scene (p. 200).

The participants were first told that they would be asked to retell the story after they had seen the film. After viewing, the participants met individually with an interviewer to record the story. They were then given 45 minutes to write it out, hence producing both a written and oral narrative.

### 3.4 Analysis

Each narrative (both oral and written) was coded first for grounding. Following Bardovi-Harlig’s (1995) approach, determination of grounding (foreground clauses vs. background clauses) is based on Hopper’s (1979) and Dry’s (1983) ideas of foreground background characteristics. Essentially, clauses that relate events belonging to the skeletal structures of the discourse and move time forward, such as (1), were considered to be foreground clauses; clauses that do not themselves narrate main events, but provide supportive material which elaborates on or evaluates the events in the foreground, such as (2), are considered to be background clauses.

- (1) There she met the man,
- (2) who was Charlie Chaplin.

Grounding analysis was performed by the researcher and a second experience coder. Interrater reliability was 97.61%. Disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Next, all verbs were coded for verbal morphology and placed in 4 main categories: “past,” “nonpast,” “no verb,” and “other.” The category of **past** was subdivided into past simple, past progressive and past perfect, whereas the category of **nonpast** was subdivided into base, present simple, present progressive,  $\emptyset$ -progressive ( $\emptyset$ -*running*,  $\emptyset$ -*crying*) and present perfect. Incorrect forms such as *mets* and *is gave* were coded as **other**, and propositions that require verbs but lack them such as *he happied* were coded as **no verb**. For the integrity of the text, rates of verbal morphology were calculated for verb tokens rather than types.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Findings

The narratives produced by the learners and native speakers varied in length. For the learners, the number of words ranged from 84-146; the number of sentences ranged from 9-17. For the native speakers, the number of words ranged from 155-328; the number of sentences ranged from 16-37.

Samples of foreground and background clauses are as follows.

#### (1) Foreground clauses

Young lady <i>stole</i> a bread.	(Oral, learner)
They <i>ran</i> away together	(Written, learner)
Charlie <i>took</i> that loaf of bread from her.	(Oral, native speaker)
The police <i>caught</i> them.	(Written, native speaker)

#### (2) Background clauses

...while she <i>get</i> in a hurry.	(Oral, learner)
..., which <i>is</i> illegal.	(Written, learner)
She <i>was</i> starving, so...	(Oral, native speaker)
...to jail where he <i>had</i> food and shelter.	(Written, native speaker)

The number of verbs across grounding in the learners’ and native speakers’ narratives are shown in Table 2.



**Table 2: Number of verbs by grounding**

	Number of Verbs			
	Oral Narratives		Written Narratives	
	Foreground	Background	Foreground	Background
<b>Thai EFL Learners (N = 30)</b>	324	267	465	311
<b>Native Speakers (N = 10)</b>	258	216	204	153

Percentage of use of verbal morphology with respect to grounding in the learners' and native speakers' narratives is demonstrated in Table 3 and Table 4, respectively.

**Table 3: Use of verbal morphology by grounding in learners' narratives**

	Thai EFL Learners			
	Oral Narratives		Written Narratives	
	Foreground	Background	Foreground	Background
<b>Past</b>	<b>64.31</b>	<b>20.51</b>	<b>71.67</b>	<b>43.89</b>
Past Simple	62.43	16.72	69.08	38.82
Past Progressive	1.07	3.56	1.97	4.28
Past perfect	0.81	0.23	0.62	0.79
<b>Nonpast</b>	<b>35.69</b>	<b>79.49</b>	<b>28.33</b>	<b>56.11</b>
Base	23.95	32.81	18.63	22.13
Present Simple	6.52	38.53	4.27	26.76
Present Progressive	1.14	2.54	1.36	2.38
Ø-Progressive	1.24	1.64	0.84	0.75
Present Perfect	0.55	0.95	0.69	1.08
<b>No verb</b>	<b>1.05</b>	<b>1.37</b>	<b>1.38</b>	<b>1.42</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>1.24</b>	<b>1.65</b>	<b>1.16</b>	<b>1.59</b>

**Table 4: Use of verbal morphology by grounding in native speakers' narratives**

	Native Speakers of English			
	Oral Narratives		Written Narratives	
	Foreground	Background	Foreground	Background
<b>Past</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Past Simple	96.86	92.79	97.49	93.95
Past Progressive	1.65	4.94	1.18	3.86
Past perfect	1.49	2.27	1.33	2.19
<b>Nonpast</b>	-	-	-	-

Base	-	-	-	-
Present Simple	-	-	-	-
Present Progressive	-	-	-	-
Ø-Progressive	-	-	-	-
Present Perfect	-	-	-	-
<b>No verb</b>	-	-	-	-
<b>Other</b>	-	-	-	-

Table 3 shows that in both oral and written narratives of the learners, the rate of use of past tense is greater in foreground than background. In the oral narratives, the past tense is used in 64.31% of the foreground clauses, but only in 20.51% of the background clauses. Similarly, in the written narratives, 71.67% of verbs in the foreground appear in the past tense, while only 43.89% of the background verbs are in past tense. For native speakers, however, past tense is used equally in foreground and background with no use of non-past, as shown in Table 4.

## 5. Discussions

### 5.1 *Foreground and background*

That the learners tended to use simple past tense in the foreground of their narratives is congruent with Flashner's (1989) and Bardovi-Harlig's (1992) findings. Similar to the present study, Flashner found that Russian learners of English tended to mark foreground verbs with simple past tense. Similarly, Bardovi-Harlig found that the majority of her learners employed simple past tense in the foreground. The findings of the present study, however, are not congruent with Kumpf's (1984) study in which the learner tended to use the base form of the verb in the foreground.

That the learners tended to use the present simple and base form in the background of their narratives is in agreement with part of Kumpf's (1984) and Flashner's (1989) findings. In Kumpf's study, the learner tended to morphologically mark background verbs with tense and aspect, while in Flashner's (1989) study, the learners simply used the base form in the background. The result of the present study, however, corroborates Bardovi-Harlig's (1992) findings in that the learners tended to use the present simple or base form in the background.

### 5.2 *Thai EFL learners and native speakers of English*

In this study, it is evident that Thai EFL learners and native speakers of English differ in their use of past tense. Native speakers did not exhibit different rates of use of

past tense in the foreground and background of their narratives. They showed a high use of past equally in foreground and background with no use of non-past. The learners, however, exhibited different rates of use of past tense in the foreground and background of their narratives. They tended to employ past tense in the foreground while using non-past forms (i.e., present simple and base forms) in the background. This suggests that the learners' use of verbal morphology conforms to the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis by which the association of verbal morphology and narrative grounding is predicted.

The association of past tense with narrative grounding can be attributed to the learners' proficiency with respect to L2 tense-aspect system. According to Bardovi-Harlig (1995), learners continually develop their L2 tense-aspect system with low proficiency learners displaying inaccurate use of tense-aspect to high proficiency learners utilizing native-like use of tense-aspect. It is likely that the low-proficiency learners have not fully developed their L2 tense-aspect system. At this stage, they might still fluctuate between two grammars (past vs. non past). It is possible that, in the path of development, they understand that past tense is used in the foreground while in the background past tense should not be used. Thus, in the background, they use non-past but because it is difficult for them to supply a correct morpheme, they fluctuate between the present simple and base forms.

## **6. Conclusion**

To conclude, the present study revealed that Thai EFL learners exhibited different rates of use of past tense in the foreground and background of their narratives. Since the learners tended to employ past tense in the foreground while using non-past forms (i.e., present simple and base form) in the background, the rate of use of past tense is greater in foreground than background. This suggests that the learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground and background in narratives, conforming to the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis.

In practical terms, this study offers support for explicit instruction of tense-aspect morphology. This study suggests that the use of past morphology in foreground should be introduced and practiced prior to use of past morphology in background because it is easier to master. Furthermore, as the use of past morphology in background is relatively problematic, activities enhancing learner's use of past in the background should supplement instruction in L2 learning, particularly when learners are at the early stages of L2 tense-aspect development.

The scope of the present study suggests possibilities for future research. First, this study is a cross-sectional investigation of a small group of Thai EFL learners. Future research may find it beneficial to investigate larger groups of learners with different levels of proficiency. Second, this study did not address how each individual learner differs. Future researchers, therefore, may include learners' individual difference or incorporate longitudinal analysis in order to document the development of the tense-aspect system in second language acquisition.

#### Notes:

1. A [+tense] language is a language which has tense inflection while a [-tense] language is a language which has no tense inflection.
2. I am using the transcription system of The Royal Institute (1982).

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