

ENCODING COMPLEX EVENTS IN ADVANCED ENGLISH L2 PRODUCTIONS: THE ROLE OF ASPECT IN THE EXPRESSION OF SIMULTANEITY

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In the present paper we look into the expression of simultaneity in oral narratives produced by advanced Catalan and French learners of English as a foreign language. The three languages encode tense and aspect morphologically, yet display a number of fine dissimilarities, particularly with respect to the grammaticalisation of the progressive aspect. Two particular areas seem to resist themselves to the advanced Catalan and French learners of English in our study: (1) uncovering the information selection patterns underlying the expression of simultaneity in English L1 and (2) gauging the function of the progressive in oral narratives elicited by means of picture books. The initial advantage that French and Catalan learners may have regarding the learning of the progressive/non-progressive distinction in English can also mislead from the preferred rhetorical choices in the target language, at least in the expression of simultaneity.

Keywords: advanced learners, EFL, tense-aspect morphology, simultaneity.

1. Introduction

1.1 The temporal relation of simultaneity: definition and linguistic expression in English L1

Simultaneity has generally been analysed in the wider context of the expression of temporality in narrative discourse, both in first and second language acquisition (Aksu-Koç and von Stutterheim 1994 for L1; Schmiedtová 2004; Leclercq 2007 for L2). Numerous studies in psycholinguistics have shown that the expression of temporal relations is conditioned by the grammaticalised devices available in a given language and is closely related to certain information selection patterns which appear to be language specific (von Stutterheim and Lambert 2005; von Stutterheim and Carroll 2006; Carroll and Lambert 2006 among others). The study of simultaneity, in particular, has provided some interesting insights into the information selection processes underlying, for instance, the use of tense-aspect morphology or of temporal adverbials and conjunctions in native and learner narratives.

One needs to clearly distinguish between extra-linguistic simultaneity *i.e.*, what is perceived as simultaneous in the extra-linguistic world and linguistic simultaneity *i.e.*, what is encoded as simultaneous. This distinction is relevant for at least two reasons. Firstly, in discourse, a relation of simultaneity can be established between events which do not overlap in the extra-linguistic world. According to Aksu-Koç and von Stutterheim, (t)wo events, processes, or states are considered to be simultaneous if they share “a value on the time axis” (1994: 397). This value does not need to be the actual event time (ET) but a more subjective standpoint, the reference time (RT), from which the speaker presents a temporally anterior event as still relevant at the time of a later

event. In example (1) below, E2 precedes E1 in the extra-linguistic world, yet E2 is presented as still relevant at the time of E1 by means of the present perfect form:

- (1) a. early the next morning the –both discover (E1)
b. that the frog has escaped (E2). (ENG7)
[E2 precedes E1 but RT1 = RT2]

Secondly, the distinction between extra-linguistic and linguistic simultaneity is relevant because a speaker may choose not to encode two simultaneous events as simultaneous. This strategy is common in L2 productions, as learners struggle with accessing target language structures in on-line tasks. Compare, for instance, the degree of event condensation in example (2) below, produced by an English native speaker, and with that in (3), the representation of the same scene by a Catalan learner of English:

- (2) a. the boy tumbles down from the branch
b. because of an owl who's popped from a hole.
c. and the dog runs howling by
d. with this swarm of bees chasing him. (Eng L1)
- (3) a. they meet many other animals such as bees #.
b. but the frog was not there yet #.
c. the boy looks for the # frog.
d. # but he couldn't find it. (Cat L1 Eng L2)

In the present paper, we look into the expression of simultaneity in oral narratives produced by advanced Catalan and French learners of English. The narratives belong to the long-lasting tradition of the *Frog, where are you?* (Mayer 1969) picture book story (from now on the *Frog* story), initiated by Berman and Slobin (1994). The expression of simultaneity in the *Frog* story was first analysed by Aksu-Koç and von Stutterheim (1994), working with child and adult L1 productions from a variety of languages, including English. With regard to the linguistic devices to encode simultaneity in English L1, the authors identified a series of specialised devices such as the use of temporal subordinating conjunctions (*when, while, as*), the progressive aspect and the contrast between progressive/non-progressive verb forms, or the temporal adverbials *meanwhile, in the meantime*. Very importantly, the authors observed that the use of aspect marking to encode simultaneity declines at age 9, while other strategies (particularly subordination and aspectual contrast) take over in older children and adult narratives. Other, less specialised devices were also used in the English native speaker *Frog* stories, such as inceptive or continuative periphrases with *start* or *continue*, the adverb *still*, verbs of perception, or the inherent durative quality of the predicates, in parallel constructions containing activity predicates such as *The boy looks in the boots and the dog looks in the jar*.

1.2 Analysing temporality in the *Frog* story: which framework?

With respect to the overall narrative structure, Aksu-Koç and von Stutterheim identified simultaneity in three types of contexts: between events in the foreground, between events and states within the background, and between events and states across foreground and background. While Hopper's (1974) foreground/background analytical framework has extensively been applied to the analysis of temporality in narrative

discourse, we believe that the foreground/background dichotomy does not allow us to fully account for the intricate construction of temporality in the *Frog* story.

To mention one reason only, retrospective narrative material and simultaneity in the foreground are not contemplated in Hopper's framework. Nevertheless, the picture book format of the *Frog* story calls for an often non-linear account of the search for the frog. While some of the episodes are presented in visually adjacent scenes, for instance the episode of the mole, and the narrator can see a continuity between the characters' acts and their outcomes, other episodes are presented in visually non-adjacent scenes, for instance the episode of the owl, which means that the narrator will need to recall certain visually inaccessible events in order to interpret a particular outcome. The other case of non-linearity in the *Frog* story is when the two protagonists of the story are involved into simultaneous series of events, which are both motivated by the theme of the search and, as such, equally contribute to the plot.

The analytical framework used in our study is based on the concept of narrative move (Nakhimovsky 1988, Curell 2002). A narrative is understood as an articulated system of moves, where a move represents the way in which the reference time (RT) is established from one sentence to another in the narrative. There are three main types of narrative moves: (1) forward moves (*i.e.*, given two adjacent sentences/clauses, the RT of the second sentence/clause is posterior to the RT of the first one); (2) sideways moves (*i.e.*, given two adjacent sentences/clauses, there is a common RT value and the ET of the second sentence/clause overlaps/is included in/ includes the ET of the first one) and (3) backward moves (*i.e.*, given two adjacent sentences/clauses, the RT of the second sentence/clause precedes the RT of the first one). Forward moves correspond to updates of the current RT and constitute passages of narrative progression, whereas sideways moves correspond to passages in which the narrative time is at a standstill. Backward moves are associated with retrospective passages which interrupt the chronological flow of the narrative, and which can also have an internal temporal structure. Example (4) below illustrates the different types of temporal moves in our corpus:

- | | | |
|-----|--|----------|
| (4) | a. the dog <u>falls</u> out of the window – with the jar on his head | FORWARD |
| | b. and the little boy just <u>watches</u> | SIDEWAYS |
| | c. him fall | SIDEWAYS |
| | d. still wondering where - the frog is... | SIDEWAYS |
| | e. um – the little boy <u>goes</u> after the dog – | FORWARD |
| | f. and he <u>looks</u> very angry at the dog | FORWARD |
| | g. because he – <u>put</u> the jar on his head | BACKWARD |
| | h. and <u>fell</u> out of the window | BACKWARD |
| | i. but the dog seems to be friendly. | FORWARD |
| | (Eng L1, E8) | (-) |

The different move types were established on the basis of the following criteria: the presence of certain temporal adverbials or conjunctions (*then, suddenly, when, after, while, etc.*); pragma-semantic relations between situations (*e.g.* cause-effect relations; movement in space triggers movement in time); inferences based on the type of discourse *i.e.*, the fact that we expect situations in a narrative to observe a certain chronological order, and on picture book knowledge; the (un)bounded nature of the sentence/clause, established on the basis of the inherent semantics of the predicates and other sentence/clause-level elements (such as the presence of the progressive or perfect inflection). Very importantly, there is a hierarchy in the contribution these criteria to the

temporal organisation of narrative discourse. For instance, states and progressives can appear in forward moves in the presence of an RT-shift temporal adverbial such as *then* or *now*.

2. The expression of simultaneity in English L2 narratives

2.1 Corpus

The corpus used consists of the oral narratives of twelve English native speakers (ENG) and of four groups of advanced learners of English: two groups of French L1 learners (12 CAPES and Agrégation students with a C1 level (FRENGS) and 12 professors of English with a C2 level (FRENGT)) and two groups of Catalan L1 learners (English Philology students with a C1 level (CATENGs) and 12 professors of English with a C2 level (CATENGt)). The corpus also includes the oral narratives of twelve French native speakers (FRE) and twelve Catalan native speakers (CAT).

2.2 Research questions

In the present paper, the expression of simultaneity will be discussed with respect to two episodes in the *Frog* story, namely the “mole” episode and the “owl” episode (see the Appendix), given the high degree of coercion on the speaker to encode the simultaneity relation in these scenes. The question we try to answer is whether advanced L2 learners have uncovered the relation existing between grammatical devices, namely tense-aspect forms, and information selection patterns in the target language. According to von Stutterheim and Carroll (2006), this seems to be the ultimate challenge in second language acquisition/learning.

The episodes will be first analysed in terms of their degree of temporal granularity (Noyau *et al.* 2004) –the degree of temporal partitioning of the scenes into temporal moves. We are interested to see how extra-linguistic simultaneity is conceptualized in advanced English L2 and whether learners perform nativelike or are conditioned by their mother tongue “lens” in the selection of the temporal information to be encoded. Secondly, we shall focus on the use of grammatical devices, namely the progressive form, to encode sideways moves in the selected scenes. According to the Discourse Hypothesis (Bardovi-Harlig 2000), there is a correlation between the choice of tense-aspect forms and the type of narrative material to be encoded. We expect the progressive form to strongly correlate with sideways moves in the selected scenes and to appear marginally in forward moves, as an effect of the task type.

3. Results and discussion

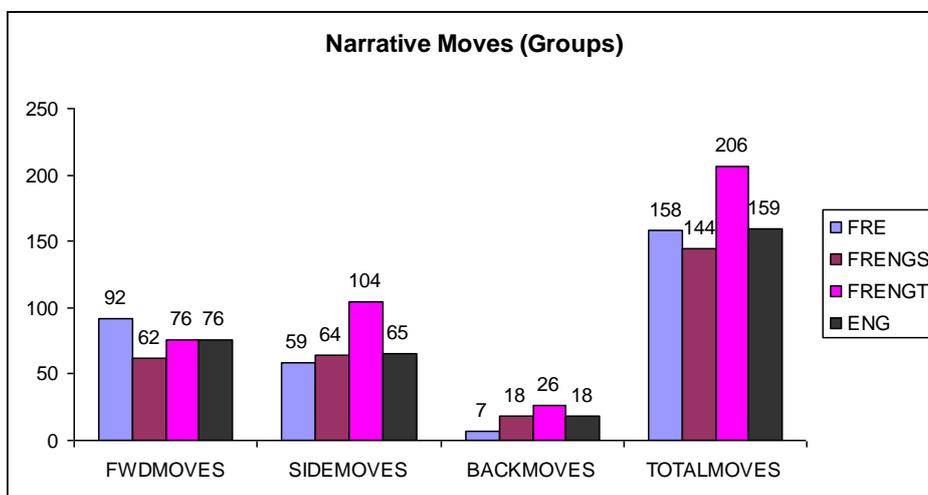
3.1 Temporal granularity

Figure 1 below shows the distribution of the different types of moves (forward, sideways, and backward) in the English L2 narratives of the French mother tongue learner groups (FRENGS and FRENGT). For comparison purposes, we include the distribution of the moves in English L1 (ENG) and French L1 (FRE) narratives.

With respect to the total number of moves produced in the episodes, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests performed on the raw figures of the groups established no significant differences between FRENGT and ENG, nor between FRENGS and ENG. A significant difference was established between the two learner groups, FRENGT producing a statistically robust higher number of narrative moves than FRENGS ($p=.027$). This seems to indicate that higher temporal granularity

matches with higher proficiency in the L2, but it is not necessarily an indicator of nativelike performance on the task.

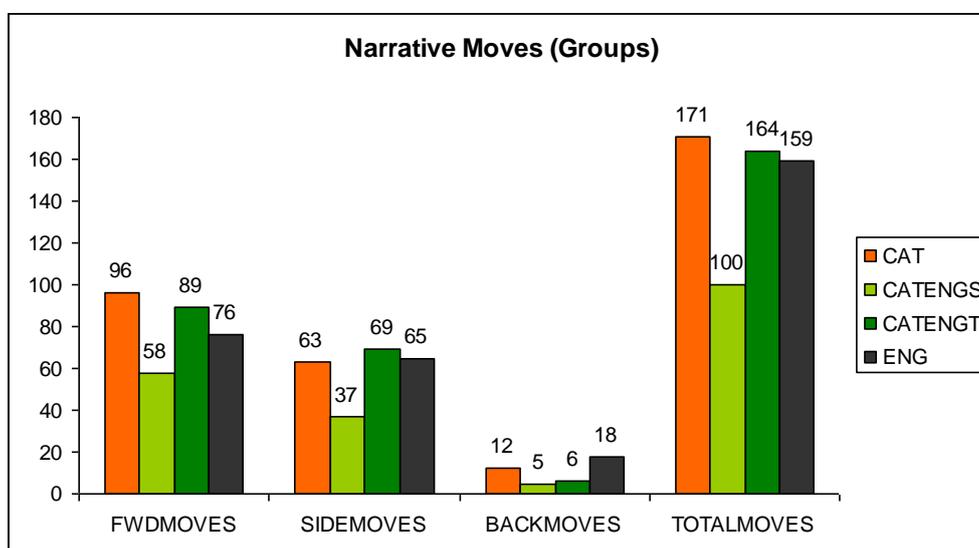
Figure 1: Temporal granularity in learner and native speaker narratives – raw numbers of temporal moves (FRE, FRENGS, FRENGT, ENG)



With respect to the distribution of the different move types, statistically significant differences exist between FRENGT and ENG ($p=.031$) and between FRENGT and FRENGS ($p=.020$) with respect to the total number of sideways moves. Nevertheless, no statistically robust difference was detected between FRENGS and ENG with respect to the sideways moves ($p=.767$). Therefore, the number of sideways moves increases with L2 proficiency, but it is not necessarily an indicator of nativelike performance on the task.

Figure 2 below shows the distribution of the different types of moves (forward, sideways, and backward) in the English L2 narratives of the Catalan mother tongue learner groups (CATENGs and CATENGt). For comparison purposes, we include the distribution of the moves in English L1 (ENG) and Catalan mother tongue (CAT) narratives.

Figure 2: Temporal granularity in learner and native speaker narratives – raw numbers of temporal moves (ENG, CATENGs, CATENGt, CAT)



Once again, higher granularity also matches with higher proficiency in the target language: CATENGT produce a statistically higher number of moves in the selected scenes than CATENGS ($p=.010$). Moreover, CATENGT perform natively with respect to the total number of moves produced ($p=.862$), whereas CATENGS produce robustly fewer moves than ENG in our study ($p=.002$).

CATENGT produce robustly more elaborated narratives in terms of forward and sideways moves than CATENGS, who often “reduce” the scenes to one or two moves (see example (3) above). Interestingly, both learner groups differ from the native speakers with respect to the number of backward moves produced: both CATENGS and CATENGT produce robustly fewer backward moves than ENG. This might be due to the fact that backward moves in past-based narratives are generally encoded by means of the past perfect, which may be more costly to use for learners than the simple past in the present-based narratives.

The comparison between the learner groups and their mother tongue control groups reveals some interesting patterns. FRENGS and FRENGT gradually move away from the source language patterns: FRENGS produce robustly more backward moves than FRE ($p=.032$), whereas FRENGT widen the gap with FRE and produce robustly more sideways ($p=.016$) and backward moves ($p=.008$). FRENGT seem to adopt a more “in-depth” perspective on the scenes than speakers in French L1.

The Catalan learners of English stay closer to the source language model than the French L1 learners. No significant differences were established between CATENGT and CAT. CATENGS, on the other hand, under-perform with respect to CAT both in terms of the overall number of moves and the different types of moves, which means that their performance follows neither a target language nor a source language pattern.

3.2 Tense-aspect morphology in sideways moves

As can be seen from Figure 3 below, the progressive form dominates the sideways moves both in present and past-based narratives in English L2, whereas in English L1, approximately 48% of the sideways moves are encoded in the simple present form as opposed to 33% in the present progressive. Interestingly, the English native speakers use the simple present form even when the context contains an explicit mark of simultaneity (example (5)).

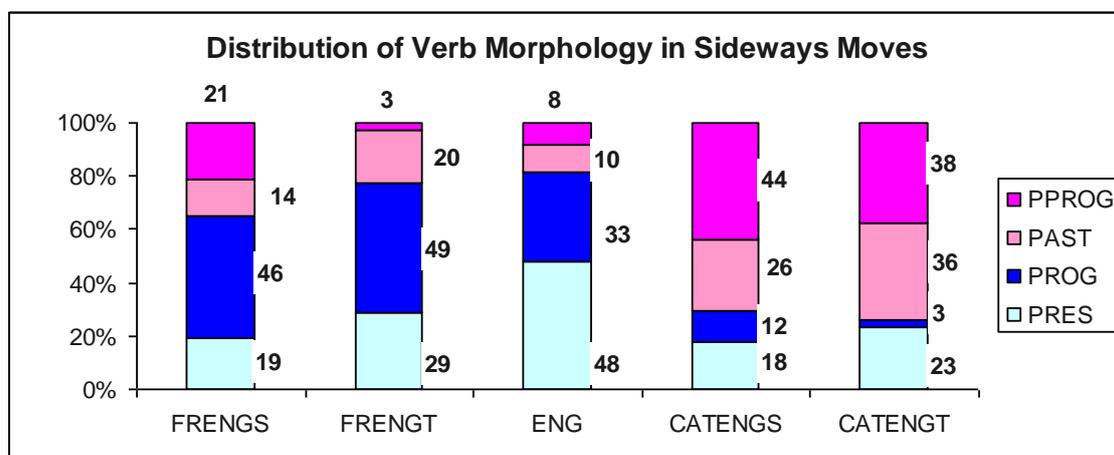


Figure 3: Tense-aspect forms in sideways moves in English L1 and English L2

- (5) a. the little boy falls off the tree - FORWARD
 b. uh frightened by an owl /
 c. the dog runs away SIDEWAYS
 d. **as** - bees follow him ... SIDEWAYS
 (Eng L1, ENG2)

With respect to the learner groups, FRENGS rely less on the simple present when encoding sideways material than ENG ($p=.047$). Even though FRENGT perform natively with respect to the distribution of verb morphology in sideways moves, they differ from ENG in that they use the progressive marginally more often than ENG in forward moves ($p=.073$). It seems, therefore, that the more proficient French L1 learners of English opt for a highly aspectualised presentation of simultaneity in the selected scenes, and extend this aspectualisation to forward moves. This creates a tension between the semantics of the form (inherently unbounded) and its function in discourse (update of the current RT). In (6 b) below, in spite of the sequencing effect of the temporal adverbial *now*, the progressive signals a switch from the narrative to the descriptive mode.

- (6) a. right the the beehive has fallen on the ground. BACKWARD/RT-SHIFT
 b. and the bees are escaping **now**. FORWARD
 (Fr L1 Eng L2, FRENGT5)

With respect to the Catalan mother tongue learners of English, both CATENGs and CATENGT produce robustly more past progressive in sideways moves than ENG ($p=.028$ and $p=.017$ respectively). Interestingly, only 2 CATENGs, 2 CATENGT and 1 ENG use the past progressive in forward moves, which seems to indicate that the choice of the past as a narrative tense checks the use of the past progressive form in forward moves both in native and learner production (example (7)).

- (7) a. and that hole was an <owl> [/] owl house or something. BACKGROUND
 b. and the owl scared the boy. FORWARD
 c. and meanwhile the bees were running after the dog. SIDEWAYS
 (Cat L1 Eng L2, CATENGs8)

4. Conclusion

It is generally the very proficient learners (FRENGT and CATENGT) who conceptualise simultaneity with a nativelike degree of granularity and elaborate the scenes both linearly (forward moves) and laterally (sideways moves). Less proficient learners, particularly CATENGs, tend to prune the scenes to their plot-advancing elements. The source / mother tongue combination under study here involves a shift from a sequential account of events, dominated by forward moves, to a more encompassing approach, based on both forward and sideways moves. The gradual shift in the information selection processes underlying the expression of simultaneity in English L2 is triggered by the availability of certain grammaticalised devices in the target language (*e.g.* the progressive and the perfect forms).

The break with the mother tongue information selection patterns is stronger in the case of our French L1 English L2 learners than in the case of the Catalan L1 English L2 ones. This could be due to the difference in the temporal anchor chosen by the two groups. The majority of French learners in our corpus narrate in the present, a ground on which French and English are radically different given that no consistent progressive/non-progressive contrast is available in French. The Catalan L1 learners, on

the other hand, narrate mainly in the past, drawing on the perfective/imperfective semantic division informing the distribution of tense-aspect morphology in the past in Catalan.

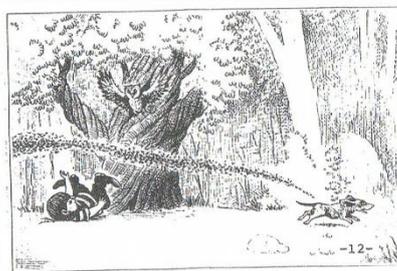
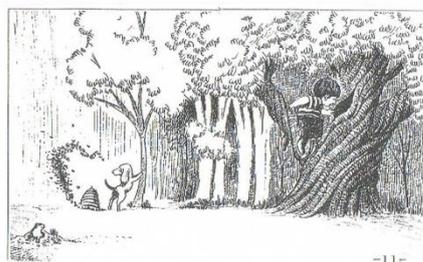
With respect to the linguistic expression of simultaneity in English L2, it seems that the use of the progressive responds, in part, to principles of narrative organization. In past-based narratives, the progressive is consistently associated with sideways moves both in native and learner narratives. However, in present-anchored narratives, the progressive appears in contexts of temporal progression and can encode forward moves in the narrative, pointing at the fact that discourse functions of grammatical forms are understood locally (at picture or scene level) rather than in relation to the discourse type. Moreover, it seems that the existence of similar linguistic devices, such as the progressive form, in source and target language is not enough to ensure targetlike use of tense-aspect morphology in L2. While the progressive form is produced accurately by our advanced French learners of English, the way it is integrated in the overall construction of temporality remains under the influence of the learners' mother tongue "lens".

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Appendix





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