

# Line or Circle? The Process of Past Tenses Acquisition by Advanced Learners of French

Emmanuelle Labeau

Aston University

## 1. Introduction

Acquisition of tense and aspect constitutes a current active area of research as shown by Salaberry and Shirai's (2002) and Bardovi-Harlig's (2000) recent summative books. The focus was first on case studies of beginners in naturalistic settings; different settings (e.g. formal teaching), levels and languages are now being tackled. In this paper, we start with a brief review of the seminal contribution by Andersen as well as concurrent explanatory schemes before evaluating their relevance for our corpus that illustrates the acquisition of the past verbal system by advanced tutored learners of French (for other studies on French, see Bergström 1995, Howard 2002, Kihlstedt 1998, Labeau 2002).

Andersen's (1991) model of tense-aspect acquisition, based on Spanish past tenses, shows it as a linear process in eight stages. According to Andersen's hypothesis, verbal morphology emerges in complementary distribution: perfective with events (the term provided by Mourelatos, 1981 for accomplishments and achievements), imperfective with states and progressive with activities<sup>1</sup>.

	STATES "had"	ACTIVITIES "played"	TELIC EVENTS "taught x to y"	PUNCTUAL EVENTS "broke in two"
1	tiene	juega	enseña	se parte
2	tiene	juega	enseña	<i>se partió</i>
3	<b>tenía</b>	juega	enseña	<i>se partió</i>
4	<b>tenía</b>	<b>jugaba</b>	<i>enseño</i>	<i>se partió</i>
5	<b>tenía</b>	<b>jugaba</b>	<i>enseño</i> <b>enseñeba</b>	<i>se partió</i>
6	<b>tenía</b>	<b>jugaba</b> <i>jugó</i>	<i>enseño</i> <b>enseñeba</b>	<i>se partió</i>
7	<b>tenía</b>	<b>jugaba</b> <i>jugó</i>	<i>enseño</i> <b>enseñeba</b>	<i>se partió</i> <b>se partía</b>
8	<b>tenía</b> <i>tuvo</i>	<b>jugaba</b> <i>jugó</i>	<i>enseño</i> <b>enseñeba</b>	<i>se partió</i> <b>se partía</b>

Table from Andersen 1991: 314

At stage one, neither past tense nor aspect is marked and a default form (the present) is used. Stage 2 sees preterit appear with punctual verbs only whilst stative verbs emerge in the imperfect at stage 3. Stage 4 sees past marking in all categories with preterit spreading to accomplishments and imperfect to activities. From stage 5 onwards, verbal morphology starts overlapping within each verb category and stage 8, where stative verbs are finally encoded in the preterit, is supposed to represent the final development of the tense / aspect system:

<sup>1</sup> Andersen relies on Vendler's 'time schemata'. Vendler (1967) distinguishes between four categories of verbs: (i) states (e.g. 'to like'), (ii) activities (e.g. 'to read a book'), (iii) accomplishments (e.g. 'to run a mile') and (iv) achievements (e.g. 'to win a race'). His main distinction comes from the ability of verb phrases to be used in the progressive form. Accomplishments and activities can both be used in such a way but they can respectively combine with a temporal complement of the type 'in + duration' (e.g. 'run a mile in five minutes') or 'within + duration' (e.g. 'eat within 2 minutes'). States and achievements are believed not to accept the progressive, but states have a duration whilst the second are instantaneous.

Stage 8 captures the final development that takes the non-native speakers to the endpoint of their acquisition: states can now be represented as a whole, having a beginning and an end, as punctual and telic events have inherently.

There are, by stage 8, still some nonnative glitches in the system. But with regard to the ability to manipulate Preterit and Imperfect forms to capture the speaker's perspective on the event, by stage 8, the children [...] have finally arrived at near-native competence of this system. (Andersen 1991: 316)

Andersen's initial model presents the acquisition of past tenses as a continuous linear process<sup>2</sup>. However, it is problematic on many accounts. First, his conclusions rely on the observation of only two subjects, which leaves space for idiosyncrasy and, more seriously, only four out of the eight stages are attested:

For data from two learners at two time periods, only four stages can be posited from direct evidence. These are stages 2 and 4 for Anthony and Annette, respectively, at Time 1 and stages 6 and 8 for Anthony and Annette, respectively at Time 2. The other stages are posited as intermediate stages through which the learners should have passed, even though we have no samples from these stages. (Andersen 1991: 313-4).

Then, although stage 8 is given as the final development of acquisition, Andersen admits that some « nonnative glitches » remain in the system; however, he does not explicit what those are. They may be linked with imperfect mappings of the verbal forms (on which the PAH focuses) and their functions. Finally, one could wonder whether those observations could be extrapolated to other learning contexts (instruction), other levels (near-native learners) and to other languages (French).

As for Bardovi-Harlig (1994), she questions Andersen's progressive linear development. On the basis of her longitudinal study of pluperfect (PQP) acquisition by 16 instructed learners of English from four linguistic backgrounds, she suggests that, prior to morphological mastery of the PQP, L2 learners' may use pragmatic and lexical means similar to those used in naturalistic settings (Dietrich et al. 1995). Reverse order reports were signaled on the one hand without tense contrast by single and dual time adverbs, causal adverbials, relative clauses and complements (the latter markers emerging only in later stages given their syntactic complexity) and on the other hand with tense contrast through the pluperfect. In her study, acquisition is therefore presented as a cyclic process where the same acquisitional stages (pragmatic, lexical, morphological) emerge each time that a new form is being acquired. Variationist approaches (e.g. Preston 1996) go further in postulating that several morphological markers coexist in parallel to express a function but that their complementary distribution may convey different values.

In front of these conflicting hypotheses, we could rightly ask ourselves this question : is past tenses acquisition a matter of line, a steady straight development, or circle, successive cycles of

---

<sup>2</sup> This initial formulation of the PAH has provided the basis for many research projects but Andersen (2002:93) himself acknowledges the inability of the model to account for the developmental sequence. He suggests six dimensions of the past developmental hierarchy:

1. VERB SEMANTICS: achievements → accomplishments → activities → states
2. EVENT TYPE: unitary events → habitual or iterative events
3. REALIS – IRREALIS: real factual realized events or situations → hypothetical or counterfactual events or situations.
4. PRAGMATIC ROLE: direct assertion → indirect pragmatic softener
5. GROUNDING: foreground → background
6. DISCOURSE STRUCTURE: position and function within discourse segment.

ordered acquisitional steps? The present study attempts to answer that question for the acquisition of past tenses by advanced university learners of L2 French. A presentation of the research design including subjects and tasks is first provided. Then the collected data is discussed with special attention to claims of the PAH such as (1) the role of present (PRES) as a base form to express the past and (2) preferential combinations of given lexical aspects with *imparfait* (IMP) and *passé composé* (PC)<sup>3</sup>, the nearest French equivalents of the *imperfecto* and the preterit; claims of Bardovi-Harlig (1994) on (3) the expression of reverse order and variationist claims about the (4) use according to the context and the cotext (lexical environment).

## 2. Research design

### 2.1. Subjects

This study examines ‘advanced learners’ that Bartning (1997:13) describes as:

[...] un apprenant qui a étudié la L[angue] C[ible] en tant que langue étrangère à l'école, souvent dans un pays autre que celui de la langue cible, et qui continue à l'université. Il s'agit d'un apprenant guidé, ayant des connaissances métalinguistiques de la langue cible. Son apprentissage est parfois « mixte » grâce à des stages et des séjours à l'étranger [...] Pour exercer ultérieurement des activités professionnelles, il aura souvent besoin d'un répertoire spécifique et explicite des structures d'expressions [...] Ajoutons que la langue étrangère n'est pas toujours sa deuxième langue mais souvent la troisième.

An advanced learner is therefore understood as an instructed learner who deepens his or her knowledge of French at degree level and who may have benefited from stays in a target language country (mixed learning in both natural and academic settings) and from other language learning experiences. Our cohort differs from learners described in North American studies who, although at university, are (false) beginners in the language (e.g. Bergström 1995) or foreign students learning the language for instrumental purpose in the target language country (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig's pre-enrolment courses). Our learners have indeed enjoyed a longer experience of the foreign language, on average 8 years at level 1, compared with 1.74 years in high school and 1.66 semesters in college in Salaberry (1998) or six semesters after a false beginners' start (Bergström 1997). Our subjects also seem to possess a higher mastery of the language as shown by the presence of *plus-que-parfait* (PQP) at all levels (whilst PQP does not appear in Bergström's (1997) data) and even of *passé simple* (PS)<sup>4</sup> that is not mentioned in any other study.

Furthermore, our data include a pseudo-longitudinal dimension in that it examines three levels of learning, thereby helping refine our understanding of acquisition at various stages of the advanced variety. Four different categories of students participated in the project: (1) 21 first year students, (2) 17 second year students, (3) 23 fourth<sup>5</sup> year students giving a total of 61 learners of French as a foreign language (FFL) and (4) 6 French exchange students who acted as a control group.

Finally, the number of subjects under study (61) is larger than that which is usually found in L2 acquisition. Usually studies focus on individuals or very small groups: 4 in Kihlstedt (1998), 16 in Kaplan (1987), 18 in Howard (2002), 39 in Salaberry (1998), with the noticeable exception of Bergström (1995) who works on data produced by 117 L2 French learners. Through a fairly large number of subjects we want to provide the basis for a credible generalization of results.

---

<sup>3</sup> The PC was originally a present perfect but it has acquired throughout the centuries a preterite value (a general tendency for natural languages according to Bybee 1995) and has challenged the original preterit, the *passé simple*, the use of which is now restricted to written communication and certain registers. For more details, see Engel (1990), Labeau (2002) and Labeau et alii (wip).

<sup>4</sup> Given the restrictions of uses of the PS, some have advocated its redundancy and rejected it from FFL (Gougenheim et al. 1964).

<sup>5</sup> The third year of the degree programme is spent abroad and is therefore not taught.

## 2.2. Corpus

The general design of our research (Labeau 2002) is based on that of Salaberry (2000), as it was - as far as research methodology is concerned - the most sophisticated available on the development of past tense-aspect acquisition at the time the present data collection was launched (November-December 2001). Nonetheless, our study differs from Salaberry's in several respects. It includes (1) both oral (Hasbún 1995, Salaberry 2000) and written (see Bergström 1995, 1997) movie narratives, (2) an individual grammar cloze-test (aspectual choices) based on (a) two literary texts, (b) a narrative text made up of problematic segments found in the pilot study at level 1, (c) a student's description of a series of cartoons depicting a story set in prehistoric times, and finally (3) written judgment acceptability tests (Broady & L'Huillier 2002).

The variety of tests devised is intended to investigate possible discrepancies in the use of past tenses according to the task. For example would tasks where the focus is on form (such as a grammatical test) beget a more native-like mastery? Or would there be differences between oral and written narratives due to the possibility of editing in the latter case ?

## 3. Discussion of data

### 3.1. The PRES as default form

The PAH makes predictions about an order of acquisition for morphological verbal markers of the past. In its stage 1, it postulates the existence of a base form before the emergence of past tenses. It is followed by preterit in stage 2 and imperfect in stage 3. We will now test whether these claims are verified in our data. The concept of base form is summarized by Kihlstedt (1998: 148) as relying on three characteristics: unmarkedness, high frequency and morphological simplicity. In the area of tense-aspect, the base form is the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular of the PRES (Bartning 1997). The PAH postulates the existence of such a form at stage 1 where the function of past is expressed by a morphological PRES (Andersen 1991) and Kihlstedt (1998: 155) attests the use of the PRES in past contexts, especially in the production of her less advanced subject. She mentions two characteristics of her «*forme de base* » that marks states and is equivalent to an IMP:

[...] elle affecte presque exclusivement des verbes d'état et coexiste dans une large mesure avec l'IMP.

Some isolated instances of the PRES found in our corpora seem to correspond to this description:

- (1) La femme a pris un pain et **est en train d'échapper** quand elle s'est tombée. (S105<sup>6</sup>) [est, ont l'envie, il y a (S110), il y a (twice in S119)]
- (2) Alors // hier il y a une femme # il y avait une femme dans la rue et: elle **porte** un # une robe noire et: elle **regarde** dans la fenêtre d'une pâtisserie st avec beaucoup de pains de gâteaux par exemple<sup>7</sup>. (S103) [sont fermées (S102), porte (S103, S113), regardent, jouent (S104), peut (S105, S111, S117), porte (S108), habite (S108), a (S108, S113), il y a (S110), connaît (S111, S120), laisse (S111), garde (S116), ont besoin (S116), c'est (S120)]
- (3) L'homme **a** une certaine attraction à la femme et il avait commis un crime à joindre la femme en prison. Les deux gens **sont** coupable des crimes différents. (S203) [est, ont (S209), a la faim (S214)]

---

<sup>6</sup> Our learners are identified by an S (for Student) followed by 3 numbers; the first indicates the academic level (1 for first year, 2 for second year and 4 for fourth year) and the last two identify the students (in alphabetical order).

<sup>7</sup> The oral narratives were transcribed according to the conventions laid down in Kihlstedt (1998).

The recourse to a PRES instead of a native IMP has been used to support the idea that aspect (imperfectivity) was marked before tense (past) as predicted by the PAH. However such a PRES also appears instead of a PC, that conveys perfectivity:

- (4) Au début d’histoire, l’agent de sécurité **a** un accident et le magasin ont du trouve un autre agent de sécurité. (S106) [sert, tire (S110), commence, reconnaît (S111), veut (S114), échappe (S120)]
- (5) quand le grande surface **est fermE** il a rencontré sa femme euh devant le porte du grande surface. (S102) [quand le magasin / est fermé (S118)]
- (6) il a été dans unE grand magasin (SNIFF) mais\_il **a** un accident avec l’agent de sécurité. (S112) [se réveille (S110)]
- (7) Cependant, la femme était trouvée par la police et l’homme **est considéré** innocent. (S203)
- (8) Elle a vu le pain dans la fenêtre et elle **a** la faim. (S214)
- (9) Et puis ils s... - ils sont montés au cinquième étage où euh euh euh **dort** la femme. Elle **dort** / dans une – une lit euh et euh l’homme - l’homme – l’homme lui était euh // \*left to go (S209)
- (10) Charlie était avec une femme dans un département / avec plusieurs étapes. Puis il **joue** avec les jouets / dans une étape. Euh il **fait** le patin à roulettes. Il **fait** le \*tourne etc euh: et puis / il a mis la femme au lit (S206)
- (11) Trois heures plus tard et le magasin a réouvert. Une femme **trouve** Chaplin dans une pile de vêtements. Il a essayé de fuir, mais les policiers l’arrêtaient. (S422)

Whilst PRES is used as a default form for past tenses, it is also used as a past narrative device on its own by native speakers. From our data, it is clear that the PRES is the most natural tense for oral narration among native speakers (one tells her oral narrative entirely in the PRES and that tense is interspersed with past forms in another narrative) and among near-native learners (two 4<sup>th</sup> year students from bilingual French-English families). This trend is well attested in previous studies (for a brief overview, see Salaberry 2000: 175) and may be explained by several factors. First, there may be an influence of the genre as « empirical evidence [...] substantiated the claim that movie narratives are recounted in present and not past tense » (Salaberry 2000: 175). The use of past tenses among native and near-native speakers may also come from their attitude towards the task of oral storytelling: learners may see it as a language practice activity while native speakers may see it as a communication task, hence the frequent slips in applying the initial instructions to use past tenses. The PRES also appears in stylistic uses such as the insertion of personal comments or of vivid reported speech.

This ambivalence of the PRES as a base form and as a native-like device for narration seems to question the linear development of tenses as presented in the PAH. In the following section, the diffusion of past tenses according to lexical aspect will come under scrutiny.

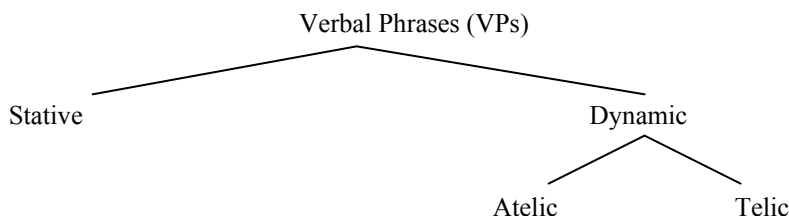
### *3.2. Complementary diffusion of PC and IMP according to lexical aspect*

According to the PAH, preferential combinations of PC and events on the one hand and IMP and states / activities on the other hand would be expected and non-typical combinations would appear more frequently at the highest levels of acquisition. In our analysis, Vendler’s time schemata have been rejected for several reasons. First, « Both [accomplishments and achievements] are actions that involve a product, upshot or outcome » (Mourelatos 1981: 193). Then no situation is instantaneous (no duration) (Klein 1994, Verkuyl 1989) and punctuality is part of the world knowledge and not a matter of lexical content (Klein 1994: 88). Moreover, some of the discriminating tests (e.g. ‘almost’ in Dowty 1979) are proven ineffective (Salaberry 2000: 34). Therefore, an increasing number of studies in both theoretical and applied linguistics have adopted a tripartite distribution:

... I will distinguish events with NATURAL endpoints (achievements and accomplishments) from those with ARBITRARY endpoints (activities) (Smith 1983: 481).

The classes of achievement and accomplishment verbs can be grounded together as telic verbs, known as *events*. (Mourelatos, 1981) (Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds 1995: 109).

So we will distinguish between, on the one hand, states that undergo no change at all from their initial to their final limit and, on the other hand, dynamic verbs that go through some changes. Dynamic verbs will be further split into telic, that imply their final limit as soon as they start (e.g. *explorer*), and atelic that imply the situation from its initial limit. (eg. *courir*)



These three subdivisions are used in the tables below. As expected, in these figures presenting the combination of tenses and lexical aspect, PC shows a great affinity with telic verbs and the proportion of this combination is fairly stable throughout our 3 learning levels, which may indicate that the PC is well integrated in the learners' interlanguage<sup>8</sup> (IL) even at the lower level. Similarly, a consistent use of PC with all three dynamic verb classes (achievements, accomplishments and activities) irrespective of proficiency level appears in Bergström (1995) and Salaberry (1998). Moreover, the closeness to native percentages may indicate a near-native use of that verbal form.

PC in written narratives	Year 1		Year 2		Year 4		Control group	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Stative verbs	9	2.42	7	2.89	9	1.86	2	1.68
Atelic verbs	61	16.4	37	15.29	59	12.19	22	18.49
Telic verbs	302	81.18	198	81.82	416	85.5	95	79.83
	372	100	242	100	472	100	119	100
PC in oral narratives	Year 1		Year 2		Year 4		Control group	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Stative verbs	19	3.925	6	1.38	16	2.37	8	3.08
Atelic verbs	98	20.25	85	19.49	118	17.48	42	16.15
Telic verbs	367	75.825	345	79.13	541	80.15	210	80.77
	484	100	436	100	675	100	260	100

These results support claims of the PAH according to which there are preferential and categorical combinations of tense and *Aktionsart*. However, although theoretically the combination of any tense with any *Aktionsart* is possible, there are prototypical combinations in native usage (see Klum 1961, Binnick 1991, among others). Therefore, the explanatory power of the hypothesis for language development may rightly be questioned when native speakers show similar tendencies to learners' (and even at times stronger associations between aspect and *Aktionsart*). This point is already made in Kihlstedt (1998: 47) and she mentions Andersen & Shirai's (1994) answer to these criticisms:

<sup>8</sup> Introduced by Selinker in 1972, interlanguage can be defined as 'interim grammars' that second language learners constructed on their way to the target language. The notion thus implies both a horizontal or synchronic dimension referring to the IL that a learner possesses at any given time and a vertical or diachronic dimension related to the developmental stages that a learner language goes through (Corder 1981). Apart from some non-systematic aspects attributed to performance, the competence of the speakers at any stage of their interlanguage manifests itself as systematic, rule-governed knowledge.

[...] chez les apprenants, il y a une allégeance absolue, sans exception, au principe de compatibilité, alors que les locuteurs natifs ont la liberté de s'en écarter.

Learners strictly apply that compatibility principle whilst native speakers may not.

On the other hand, our results for the IMP do not meet the predictions of the PAH and larger variations between levels appear:

IMP in written narratives	Year 1		Year 2		Year 4		Control group	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Stative VPs	92	45.32	47	65.28	118	62.77	18	64.29
Atelic VPs	43	21.18	14	19.44	47	25.00	9	32.14
Telic VPs	68	33.50	11	15.28	23	12.23	1	3.57
	203	100	72	100	188	100	28	100
IMP in oral narratives	Year 1		Year 2		Year 4		Control group	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Stative VPs	77	58.78	126	79.25	204	80.31	41	63.08
Atelic VPs	20	15.27	15	9.43	37	14.57	18	27.69
Telic VPs	34	25.95	18	11.32	13	5.12	6	9.23

There is a clear overuse of the IMP with telic verbs (33.5% in year 1, almost ten times more than in the control group where they account for 3.57%). It is worth noting that these figures contradict the findings of other studies where IMP is underused with dynamic verbs compared to native usage (Harley 1992, Bergström 1995). This may indicate that our subjects are indeed more advanced; they master the form and have reached the level of overgeneralization in their form-function mapping. Stative verbs account for about two thirds of all IMP in all corpora except in year 1, and dynamic verbs for one third although the proportion of telic and atelic verbs widely varies and the ratio in year 4 is closer to native usage. The frequency of passive IMP<sup>9</sup> (7.88% of all IMP in year 1, 8.33% in year 2, 5.85% in year 4 for written narratives and 11.45% in year 1, 4.4% in year 2 and 3.92% in year 4 for oral narratives) has an influence on percentages.

Some trends appear from these rough figures. First the combination of the IMP with stative verbs increases with the level of learning (+21.53% from year 1 to year 4 for written narratives, +4.3% for oral narratives) although it is supposed to be the most prototypical use and thus the first acquired. There is a less significant change with atelic verbs but there is a sharp decrease of telic verbs (-21.27% between the first and the fourth years for written narratives and -20.87% for oral narratives). These findings do not support the PAH as our less advanced learners seem to have the most varied distribution of VP types, the combination of the IMP with telic verbs decreases steadily. Our results do not support either Bergström's (1995) claim that it is not telicity, as in Andersen (1991), that guides learners' associations but dynamicity. There is also a diminution of dynamic verbs in the IMP from year 1 to year 4.

It seems therefore that the PAH does not provide a satisfactory explanation of acquisitional processes at the highest levels of proficiency, once all combinations of lexical aspect and tense have emerged. The predictions of linear development made by the PAH seem somewhat contradicted by our data and we will test in the next section Bardovi-Harlig's suggestion of cyclic development. As PC and IMP have already emerged in the productions of all our learners, we will focus here on the plus-que-parfait (PQP), emergent in our corpora that may illustrate pre-morphological means of expressing reverse order.

<sup>9</sup> The IMP (*était, étaient*) and the PC (*a été, ont été*) carry very similar phonological weight and this is reinforced by the neutralisation of [ɛ] and [e] in contemporary standard French.

### 3.3.Expression of reverse order

The use of the PQP is restricted at all levels<sup>10</sup> and the tendency is even stronger within the oral corpus, which might be explained on the one hand by the greater use of narrative PRES (that implies the use of PC to express anteriority) and on the other hand by the greater processing constraint on the subjects when producing French narratives ‘on-line’; S216’s self corrections are revealing in that respect:

- (12) Mais / la jeune femme qui / a vu l’inci... euh # l’événement euh n’était pas contente et / elle / a couru après Charlie Chaplin et le policier pour lui (COUGH) pour le / – pour le convaincre que c’était bien la jeune femme qui **avait volé** # **qui a volé** # **qui a** # **qui avait volé** le pain et pas / Charlie Chaplin (S216)

However, the PQP is less frequently but more accurately used in oral narratives, which may indicate that learners only attempt that form when they master it.

	Correct form /	Correct function	Wrong form /	Correct function	Correct form /	Wrong function	Wrong form /	Wrong function
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Written Narratives								
Year 1	6	54.55	-	0	-	0	5	45.45
Year 2	3	33.33	2	22.22	2	22.22	2	22.22
Year 4	7	58.33	1	8.33	4	33.33	-	0
Oral Narratives								
Year 1	-	0	-	0	3	100	-	0
Year 2	5	33.33	-	0	10	66.67	-	0
Year 4	4	80	-	0	1	20	-	0

We mentioned at the beginning of this section Bardovi-Harlig (1994)’s hypothesis that the acquisitional sequence of lexical means (time adverbials) before morphological means (tenses), attested in naturalistic settings, may be repeated for the PQP once the other past tenses were already mastered. Although there are instances of this phenomenon in our corpora, it is restricted to temporal adverbials and causal clauses:

- (13) Il etait en collision avec trois hommes, qu’il pensait a etre les voleurs mais en fait un des hommes etait un amis avec lequell il **a travaille avant**. (S101)
- (14) Devant ce grand magasin il y avait une voiture noire et il y avait aussi beaucoup de personnes **parce que** le gardian de nuit du grand magasin **s’est cassé** la jambe. (S215)
- (15) Il était là, j’ai imaginé, parce qu’il **a trop bu hier**. (S418)
- (23) ... il y a eu une femme qui **a vu comme cette fille a volé cette pièce de pain** (S121)
- (16) Il y avait une femme qui **a volé** le pain euh d’un camion **mais puis** euh un homme a vu euh la situation (S211)
- (17) il a commencé à parler avec ses copains qui: qu’il n’a pas vus **pendant longtemps** (S414)

Another coping technique that Bardovi-Harlig does not mention but that appears in our data is the recourse to direct speech:

<sup>10</sup> When compared to native usage, a clear underuse of the form appears at all learning levels with an average of about 0.5 PQP per essay at each level: 11 PQP for 21 essays (0.52 PQP / essay) in year 1; 9 PQP for 17 essays (0.53 PQP / essay) in year 2; 11 PQP for 22 essays (0.5 PQP / essay) in year 4. On the other hand, 13 PQP are found in the 6 essays (2.17 PQP / essay) written by native speakers. This apparent stagnation needs to take into account that the percentage of incorrect uses of the PQP decreases.



- (18) Il **a dit** « Ah j'**ai volé** / le pain » (S408)

The main IL feature that was identified was the substitution of the PC for the PQP (see also Kihlstedt's example (129) on page 154):

- (19) Une autre femme **a dit** au boucher **qu'**une femme **a pris** un pain. (S105)  
(20) Une passante, une autre femme plus agee que la derniere a vu ce qui **s'est passe** et elle a informe le conducteur du camion. (S216)  
(21) Pour la sauver, il **a reclame que c'etait** lui **qui a vole** la baguette. (S421)  
(22) une femme **a decouvert** le homme # l'homme. L'homme # Il était # il **a dormi** dans le magasin (S103)  
(23) Je pense qu'il **a casse** le- le jambe et / Charlie Chaplin – Charlie Chaplin a: pris son place comme garde de la: grand magasin. (S204) [**id.** (S209), (S212)]  
(24) les clients ont trouvé le gardien de nuit qui **s'est couché** der...- derriere le comptoir. (S406)

This type of replacements seems to support the PAH as the aspectual presentation (perfectivity) seems to precede the temporal information (double anteriority).

Therefore, our data do not support convincingly Bardovi-Harlig's cyclic hypothesis, but neither do they prove a linear development, which has already been suggested by Lightbown (1985: 177):

Even though there are acquisition sequences, acquisition is not simply linear or cumulative, and having practised a particular form or pattern does not mean that the form or pattern is permanently established. Learners appear to forget forms and structures which they had seemed previously to master and which they had extensively practised.

A last hypothesis that we would like to test is the variation of tenses uses according to the context (task) or cotext (linguistic context).

### 3.4. Variationist approach

If we compare the use of tenses across the range of tasks we have designed, we clearly see an influence of the medium. For example, oral narratives favour the use of PRES as a past narrative device whilst cloze tests with their higher focus on form encourage more traditional means of conveying past such as the *passé simple* at level 4. One striking feature of the cloze tests at level 4 is that the PS is used much more with 48 occurrences (4.1% of all answers) produced by 5 subjects<sup>11</sup> (22.73% of all subjects). In written narratives, the 11 occurrences found at that level were all produced by one of the students from a bilingual family. This is a sharp increase in both the number of subjects using that tense and in the frequency of use. However, more than half of the forms (25 PS) are found in S415's test, who had used the PS in his written narrative.

If we now consider the use of tenses within a given cotext, variationists suggest that there is a « transitional period, often very lengthy, of variability, competition among structures and divergence within the speech community » (Regan 1996: 177).

PQP is emerging and the PC and the PQP are used as variants in the same essays as shown below:

- (25) Chaplin, afin de ne pas voir la fille arrêtée par la police pour vol, a dit que s'était lui qui **avait volé** la baguette et non la fille. (S402)  
(26) Pendant que Charlie est enlevé, la dame qui avait tout vu réclame au boulanger que ce n'était pas Chaplin qui **a volé** le pain mais la fille. (S402)  
(27) L'homme a dit au gendarme qu'il **avait volé** la baguette, pas la jeune fille. (S404)  
(28) Le boulanger a dit au gendarme que la fille **a volé** le pain. (S404)

---

<sup>11</sup> S402 (8 PS), S403 (1 PS), S415 (25 PS), S421 (11 PS), S423 (3 PS).

This is especially striking in the second pair of examples where the cotext is identical. At this highest level of IL, the PC either expresses double anteriority in competition with the PQP or is still the only form used to convey this meaning. Even the 4 subjects who used at least one instance of the PQP do not use it systematically (contrary to the claims by variationists, see Bailey & Preston 1996), as the following examples prove:

- (29) Euh une fois que la dame qui a vu ce qui **s'est passé** euh a raconté l'histoire non seulement au boulanger mais aussi au policier euh qui passait. Euh Charlie Chaplin et la fille se retrouvent dans une situation un peu \*précoce (S402)
- (30) Quand les autres travailleurs étaient partis du magasin il a trouvé sa femme qui **s'est caché**. (S403)
- (31) le crime a été résolu mais c'était pas le cas parce que euh troisième femme a insisté que: c'était la deuxième femme qui **a volé** le pain / que ce n'était pas l'homme pas du tout, c'était la deuxième femme. (S417)
- (32) Mais en fait c'était la jeune fille qui l'**a volé**. (S423)

So PQP is clearly a form in the process of being acquired even among the most advanced subjects and more research needs to be devoted to the subject (see Labeau, wip).

From our data, we can see that different forms coexist to express the same functions at a given level and even in a given production (e.g. the PC and the PQP coexist to express double anteriority in year 4), which might support a variationist approach if there were a systematic use. However, our analysis could not identify patterns and free variants were used in similar environments. Ellis (1985) suggests that parallel forms in free variation come from learning hypotheses on the form-function mappings; those forms are then assigned specific functions before redundant alternative forms are eliminated.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the present paper, we have attempted to test three hypotheses about tense-aspect acquisition against probably the most advanced data studied so far. We have shown that the linear development suggested by the PAH fails to account for advanced data as it focuses on acquisition of morphology and does not take into account the full functions that forms cover in cotext and context. As a result, it cannot explain the use of PRES both as a base form and a near-native device. The PAH does not account either for the overuse of certain forms at intermediary levels of acquisition (as it is the case for the IMP in year 1).

Similarly, our data does not support convincingly the cyclic emergence of functions first through pragmatic means, then lexical means and finally morphology. Reliance on a previously acquired morphological form seems prevalent but this may be influenced by the academic settings and the adult learners illustrated in this study. Although our corpora contain instances of reverse order indicated by lexical information, this concept seems to be expressed randomly by both PQP and PC, even in the same essay.

This lack of systematic use undermines variationist approaches that postulate the existence of forms in parallel development with specific functions.

The process of tense-aspect acquisition to near-native level does not seem to follow a linear or a cyclic pattern but seems rather to adopt a pendulum movement. Learners progress towards native standards (and the acquisition of forms appears to follow a rather linear route with PRES followed by PC, IMP and PQP) but the mastery of the native form-function mapping may require adjustments, failed attempts and wrong hypotheses that explain for example the overuse of IMP with telic verbs at level 1. Overgeneralizations seem indeed an attested feature of language acquisition (e.g. Giacolome-Ramat (2002:236) mentions similar overextensions of the use of the imperfect in perfective situation among advanced Anglophone learners of Italian). That oscillation around native standards appears

therefore to offer a more realistic description of what tense-aspect acquisition of French looks like at the near-native level.

## References

- ANDERSEN, R.W. (1991) 'Developmental sequences: the emergence of aspect marking in second language acquisition', in HUEBNER, T. & FERGUSON, C.A. (eds) *Crosscurrents in Second Language Acquisition Theories*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- ANDERSEN, R.W. (2002) 'The dimensions of pastness', in Salaberry, R. & Shirai, Y. (2002), pp.79-106.
- ANDERSEN, R. & SHIRAI, Y. (1994) 'Discourse motivations for some cognitive acquisition principles', *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 16: 133-156.
- BAYLEY, R. & PRESTON, D.R. (eds) (1996) *Second language acquisition variation* (Studies in Bilingualism 10). Amsterdam / Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- BARDOVI-HARLIG, K. (1994) 'Reverse-order reports and the acquisition of tense: Beyond the principle of chronological order', *Language Learning* 44/2: 243-282.
- BARDOVI-HARLIG, K. (2000) *Tense and Aspect in Second Language Acquisition: Form, Meaning, and Use*. Oxford, Blackwells,
- BARDOVI-HARLIG, K. & REYNOLDS, D.W. (1995) 'The role of lexical aspect in the acquisition of tense and aspect', *TESOL Quarterly*, vol.29 / 1: 107-131.
- BARTNING, I. (1997) 'L'apprenant dit avancé et son acquisition d'une langue étrangère. Tour d'horizon et esquisse d'une caractérisation de la variété avancée', in BARTNING, I. (dir.) *Les apprenants avancés*. AILE 9: 9-50.
- BERGSTRÖM, A. (1997) 'L'influence des distinctions aspectuelles sur l'acquisition des temps en français langue étrangère', in BARTNING, I. (dir.) *Les apprenants avancés*. AILE 9: 51-82.
- BERGSTRÖM, A. (1995) *The expression of past temporal reference by English-speakers of French*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University.
- BROADY, E. & L'HUILLIER, M. (2002) 'L'imparfait exprime la durée dans le passé: un pas de plus et je tombais', paper presented at *Le français d'hier, d'aujourd'hui et de demain* (AFLS Conference 2002), St Andrews, 30<sup>th</sup> August-1<sup>st</sup> September 2002.
- DIETRICH, R, KLEIN, W. & NOYAU, C. (eds) (1995) *The Acquisition of Temporality in a Second Language*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- ELLIS, R. (1985) 'Sources of variability in interlanguage', *Applied Linguistics* 6/2: 118-131.
- ENGEL, D.M. (1990) *Tense and text: A study of French past tenses*. London & New York, Routledge.
- GIACOLOME-RAMAT, A. (2002) 'How do learners acquire the classical three categories of temporality? Evidence from L2 Italian' in SALABERRY, R. & SHIRAI, Y. (eds), pp.221-248
- GOUGENHEIM, G., RIVENC, P., MICHÉA, R. & SAUVAGEOT, A. (1964) *L'élaboration du français fondamental*. Paris, Didier.
- HARLEY, B. (1992) 'Patterns of second language development in French immersion', *Journal of French Language Studies* 2: 159-183.
- HASBÚN, L. (1995) *The role of lexical aspect in the acquisition of past tense / aspect system in L2 Spanish*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington.
- HOWARD, M. (2002) 'L'acquisition des temps du passé en français par l'apprenant dit avancé: une approche lexicale', in LABEAU, E. & LARRIVÉE, P. (dir.), *Les temps du passé français et leur enseignement* (Cahiers Chronos 9). Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, pp. 181-204.
- KAPLAN, M. (1987) 'Developmental patterns of past tense acquisition among foreign learners of French', in Van Patten, B. (ed.) *Foreign language learning: A research perspective*. Rowley MA: Newbury House.
- KIHLSTEDT, M. (1998) *La référence au passé dans le dialogue: Etude de l'acquisition de la temporalité chez des apprenants dits avancés de français* (Cahiers de la Recherche 6). Stockholm, G. Engwall & J. Nystedt ed.
- LABEAU, E. (2002) *The Acquisition of French Past Tenses by Tutored Anglophone Advanced Learners: Is Aspect Enough?* Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Aston University.
- LABEAU, E. (wip) Expression of reverse order in advanced tutored Anglophone learners of French: a "plus-que-parfait" mastery of temporality?
- LABEAU, E. et alii (wip) *Les temps du passé dans un corpus télévisuel*, course seminar 2003 'Contemporary French' (Aston University).

- LIGHTBOWN, P. (1985) 'Great expectations: Second-language acquisition research and classroom teaching', *Applied Linguistics* 6: 173-189.
- MOURELATOS, A. (1981) 'Events, processes, and states', in TEDESCHI, P. & ZAENEN, A. (eds) *Syntax and Semantics, vol.14: Tense and aspect*. New York, Academic Press.
- PRESTON, D.R. (1996) 'Variationist perspectives on second language acquisition', in BAYLEY, R. & PRESTON, D.R. (eds) *Second language acquisition variation* (Studies in Bilingualism 10). Amsterdam / Philadelphia, John Benjamins, pp.1-45.
- REGAN, V. (1996) 'Variation in French interlanguage: A longitudinal study of sociolinguistic competence', in BAYLEY, R. & PRESTON, D.R. (eds) *Second language acquisition variation* (Studies in Bilingualism 10). Amsterdam / Philadelphia, John Benjamins, pp.177-202.
- SALABERRY, R. (1998) 'The development of aspectual distinctions in L2 French classroom learning', *Canadian Modern Language Review* 54/4: 508-542.
- SALABERRY, R. (2000) *The development of past tense morphology in L2 Spanish*. (Studies in Bilingualism 22). Amsterdam / Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- SALABERRY, R. & SHIRAI, Y. (Eds) (2002) *The L2 Acquisition of Tense-Aspect Morphology*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- SMITH, C. (1983) 'A theory of aspectual choice', *Language* 59: 3: 479-501.
- VENDLER, Z. (1967) *Linguistics in philosophy*. Cornell University Press.

# **ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism**

edited by James Cohen, Kara T. McAlister,  
Kellie Rolstad, and Jeff MacSwan

**Cascadilla Press   Somerville, MA   2005**

## **Copyright information**

ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism  
© 2005 Cascadilla Press, Somerville, MA. All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1-57473-210-8 CD-ROM  
ISBN 978-1-57473-107-1 library binding (5-volume set)

A copyright notice for each paper is located at the bottom of the first page of the paper.  
Reprints for course packs can be authorized by Cascadilla Press.

## **Ordering information**

To order a copy of the proceedings, contact:

Cascadilla Press  
P.O. Box 440355  
Somerville, MA 02144, USA

phone: 1-617-776-2370  
fax: 1-617-776-2271  
sales@cascadilla.com  
www.cascadilla.com

## **Web access and citation information**

This paper is available from [www.cascadilla.com/isb4.html](http://www.cascadilla.com/isb4.html) and is identical  
to the version published by Cascadilla Press on CD-ROM and in library binding.