

TENSE USE IN WRITTEN DISCOURSE

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Section 1

INTRODUCTION

The semantics of verb form use in English represents a considerable source of difficulty for the learner. Within the finite verb group there are thirty two possible combinations of grammatical items, excluding inflection for number. Many of these combinations are traditionally treated as separate 'tenses', such as the 'past continuous', 'future perfect' and 'perfect conditional'. For each such tense, a number of different meanings is normally described, thus producing a complex and fragmentary account of verb form meaning. The syntactic description, however, can be simplified by recognising just five oppositions within the verb group, and if we could identify a semantic correlation for each option, verb form meaning could be presented to learners in a more coherent manner. In fact, the active/passive opposition, with its relatively straightforward semantic correlations, is normally presented as a single option within the verb group. For other categories, however, the fragmentary approach complicates the description and obscures possible generalisations.

This paper is based on the hypothesis that there are regular semantic correlations for each grammatical opposition, and that by identifying these, it is possible to produce a more economical and systematic description of verb form meaning. The interpretation of verb forms is, however, to a large extent affected by

contextual features, which mask underlying regularities. As Lyons (1977) points out, tense is a semantic feature of the whole sentence, not simply the verb itself (1977:678) and the same observation applies also to modality, voice and aspect. Consequently, other elements of the sentence contribute to the interpretation of a verb form. Relationships affecting temporal interpretation are not however confined to sentences level, but may also hold between syntactically independent sentences. (See, for example, Crystal 1966 and Smith 1978). Although this is recognised to some extent in the traditional discussion of 'sequence of tense', the explanation given is often purely mechanical and gives the impression that it represents a special use of verb forms. This is reinforced by the tendency to talk of the 'changes' which are made to verb forms, as though an utterance were first framed using 'normal' verbs, on which a set of transformational rules then operated. The argument in this paper is that, on the contrary, 'sequence of tenses' is only a specific instance of a general principle applying to connected discourse, namely that verb forms reflect relationships of temporal meaning holding between different parts of the discourse. They thus contribute to the cohesion of a text, a role which has generally received little attention.¹

The importance of contextual factors in temporal interpretation makes it essential to analyse the use of verb forms in context. The present study represents an attempt to carry out, on a small scale, such an analysis, concentrating on the only grammatical opposition obligatorily marked in the verb group, that of tense. The analysis is based on a corpus of four written informative texts, each containing approximately 250 finite verb groups.² While this investigation is clearly limited by the restricted nature of the corpus,

verb form use in other types of discourse has been kept in mind in drawing conclusions from the data. The findings, it is suggested, have general implications for the teaching of verb form use, though particularly relevant in cases where English is learnt primarily for access to information.

Section 2 REGULARITIES IN VERB FORM USE

Despite the variety of verb form combinations in English, there is a general regularity in their use in discourse. Even if we regard each possible combination as a separate 'tense', we find that in stretches of written discourse, one tense tends to predominate. In the four texts analysed, one form accounts for over 50% of all occurrences:

Table (A) Frequency of dominant verb form

Text A:	Simple present	56.1%
Text B:	Simple present	72.4%
Text C:	Simple past	64.6%
Text D:	Simple present	68.7%

Although the dominant form in written discourse is almost always a simple tense, either present or past, there is also a consistency in the use of auxiliaries. Ota (1973) reports that in his corpus, which included a variety of different types of discourse, the general tendency was that

"if the proportion of simple past to simple present increases, there is a corresponding increase in the proportion of past perfect and past progressive to present perfect and present progressive, and vice versa." (1973:38)

This observation was confirmed in the present study, and was found to extend also to modal occurrences:

Table B) Proportion of finite verb groups in the same tense as the dominant verb form

	<u>Total</u> occurrences	<u>Occurrences in same</u> <u>tense</u>	
		<u>number</u>	<u>percentage</u>
Simple	692	644	93.0%
Continuous	8	7	87.5%
Perfect	81	78	96.3%
Modal	196	163	83.2%
Modal + Perfect	4	3	75.0%
Total ³	981	895	91.2%

Thus, of total verb occurrences, only 8.8% were in a different tense from that predominating throughout the text. Even these, however, tended to cluster together; 58.1% occurred with another verb of the same tense within the same sentence, and for a further 24.5%, such a verb was present in an adjacent sentence. In the entire corpus of 981 finite verb groups, there were only 15 occurrences of an 'isolated' verb form which was not in the dominant tense.

Nehls (1975) has put forward an account of this phenomenon in terms of 'tense groups'. He suggests that there are

"Two kinds of texts in English, one kind being dominated by the Present Tense, the other one by the Past Tense. These two main tenses are accompanied by certain other tenses which belong to the respective tense group."

His description, however, is complicated by the decision to place the Past Tense in the Present Tense Group, as well as in the Past Tense Group, on the grounds that a Past Tense occurs in texts dominated by the Present Tense, when a definite time in the past is specified. This decision, however, undermines the basis of his system, since a similar argument could be used to

justify the inclusion of the Present Tense in the Past Tense Group. For example, the Present Tense form in (1) is obligatory, although it occurs in a Past Tense context:

- (1) The literate, especially the writers, began to speak in voice of their own. Many of them, one feels, shared the perceptions of a poem of 1957....

(C71)

For 'accompanying tenses' as well, special rules would be needed to account for 'anomalous' occurrences.

The problem with Nehls' account, as with the traditional description of sequence of tenses, is that it attempts to give a mechanical explanation, in terms of rules which apply irrespective of the semantic function of a verb form in a text. His special treatment of the Past Tense does involve a recognition of semantic interrelationships between a verb form and the co-text, but similar considerations apply to all verb forms, and once these are incorporated in his system, there is no longer any clear distinction between the two Tense Groups. Although his recognition of the two types of text is valid, the syntactic regularity reflects semantic factors, and cannot be adequately explained without taking these into account.

Section 3

A SEMANTIC APPROACH

In Nehls' account, each verb form combination is treated as a separate 'tense'; he identifies two 'main tenses' and groups under them various other tenses which are commonly associated with them in discourse. However, if we limit 'tense' to the grammatical category, marked by inflection of the first word of the verb group, we no longer need to specify main tenses and accompanying

tenses separately. Instead, we can simply say that verb groups of the same tense tend to cluster together, regardless of features of aspect or modality. Thus a present tense text may include verb form combinations with 'may', 'will', 'can' etc., present continuous and present perfect verb groups. The two types of text may therefore contain a variety of verb forms, but are distinguished by their consistency of tense.

This fundamental distinction is not normally applied in pedagogic grammars of English, perhaps because although it simplifies the syntactic description, it is difficult to identify a semantic correlation between past and present verb groups. Past forms, we may feel, locate an event in a past period of time, but the different verb form combinations in present tense do not necessarily locate an event 'now', at the time of speaking. Forms with HAVE typically refer to past time, and forms with modals often involve future reference. Even the simple present itself may be used to refer to events in the past and the future.⁴ The problem stems, however, from the assumption that the function of tense is to identify the time period within which an event or situation takes place. Numerous examples suggest that this may be an oversimplification, eg.

- (2) He will be in Paris by now (present time)
- (3) He was coming next week (future time)
- (4) If only it wasn't raining (present time)
- (5) You can go when you have finished (future time)

Although the position with respect to past time is less complex, it is still misleading to claim that the past tense specifically excludes the present moment (e.g. Leech 1971: 9). For example, (6) does not entail that heads of state no longer meet periodically:

- (6) Heads of state or their deputies met periodically for policy reviews. (C174)

Similarly, in (7) the last verb form occurs as part of a proposition which still holds true:

- (7) The same process of reinforcement or lack of it, it was believed, accounted for the manner in which babies started to string sounds together into meaningful sentences (A242)

Although some verb forms of this type may be explained according to 'sequence of tenses' in indirect speech, there are many instances which do not fall into this category, such as (8) and (9):

- (8) he enjoyed the book, but it was rather long

- (9) he took the road which led to the beach

In general, the connection between tense and time of occurrence is less clear-cut than is normally suggested.

Alternative explanation is that the basic functions of tense is to indicate, not the time at which an event situation takes place, but the time at which a proposition is applicable. Palmer 1974 draws attention sentences such as (10), exemplifying what he calls 'displaced' time marking:

- (10) The animal you saw was my dog.

Although the verb form in the main clause does not indicate that the situation is restricted to past time, it does indicate that the proposition is applicable at that time. The notion of applicability helps to explain similar uses of present tense verb forms, in, for examples:

- (11) Newton has explained the movements of the moon

- (12) Marx argues that revolution is inevitable

- (13) The Biafran war demonstrates the power of propaganda

It applies even more clearly to statements referring to future time. For example, (14) indicates a plan for the future which is currently in force, and (15) a plan no longer in force. The same relationship is seen in (16) and (17), which involve prediction:

- (14) The Minister is speaking tomorrow

- (15) The Minister was speaking tomorrow

- (16) They will grow if they have enough water

- (17) They would grow if they had enough water

As the last example illustrates, the 'hypothetical' use of the past can be accounted for in the same way, as indicating a proposition which does not have current applicability. "If pigs had wings, they could fly" - but since they don't, the proposition does not apply.

Regularities in verb form use cannot be explained by mechanical rules specifying that certain forms appear in association with certain other forms, since there are many irregularities to be accounted for. The notion of current applicability, however, provides a semantic distinction which accounts for both regularities and irregularities. A proposition may be presented as currently inapplicable, either because it is hypothetical rather than real, or because the speaker or writer is focussing on a period of time when it applied, and this period, either in the past or in imaginary time, excludes the time of utterance. A proposition may be currently applicable for a variety of reasons. It may refer to an event or situation actually occurring at the moment of utterance; to current possibilities, expectations and so on; to events and situations which although located in the past are seen as having current relevance with respect to the topic of discourse; or, most commonly, to those located in an undefined period of time which includes the moment of utterance.

The notion of applicability put forward here is necessarily rather loose, since it may often involve subjective judgements. However, its flexibility allows for the fact that the same event may often be reported in different tenses, depending on the speaker or writer's attitude to the event, the function of the utterance, and the way it relates to other utterances in the co-text. This concept is suggested only as the semantic correlate of the grammatical category of tense; temporal specification is refined in a variety of different ways, including use of auxiliaries and adverbials. Underlying all temporal interpretation, however, is the basic distinction between propositions which are

applicable at the time of utterance, and those which are not.

Section 4

A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

Van Dijk 1977 claims that;

"in a functional view of language, it is assumed that systematic morpho-phonological and syntactic differences correspond to semantic and pragmatic differences." (1977:149)

The semantic distinction correlating with the grammatical category of tense has already been discussed, but in addition we can identify a corresponding difference in terms of the communicative function of a text. In discussing the syntactico-semantic evidence for the existence of 'macro-structures' in discourse, Van Dijk mentions 'macro-structurally determined identity of time, place or modality' (1977:152). This clearly relates to the use of tense in discourse. Since there are only two tense forms and a vast number of possible functions that any individual utterance may carry out, correlation between tense and function occurs only at a relatively high level of analysis. We find that stretches of writing which are consistent with respect to tense are also consistent with respect to macro-function, regardless of the different functions that may be identified at lower levels of analysis. If we take a functional view of language, then it is not surprising to find a consistent relationship between grammar, semantics and function. The semantic distinctions, however, are often quite subtle, and for pedagogic purposes, it seems that an account of verb form meaning based on functional criteria may be easier for learners to grasp, since it allows simplification without distortion.

The two major types of text identified in the corpus can be classified in terms of function as 'description' and 'report'.⁵ Description, distinguished by the use of present tense verb forms, deals with characteristics, properties and habits with respect to the topic of discourse. The time sphere of description is an undefined period of time which includes the time of utterance, and this is reflected in the use of present tense verb forms indicating current applicability. There is, however, no specific limit to the extension of this period into past or future time. Although we can make distinctions between the time periods involved in sentences such as (18) to (22), these distinctions do not appear to be either grammatically or functionally significant.⁶

(18) Two and two make four

(19) The sun rises in the east

(20) Dar es Salaam is the capital of Tanzania

(21) John has red hair

(22) John has a red car

One difference between report and description, therefore, is that a description does not normally provide a specific reference time at which the events and situations take place. It is therefore inappropriate to ask the question 'when?' in relation to a description, as may be demonstrated by applying this test to the examples above.

By contrast, a report deals with events and situations located in a specific period of time. Except in its 'hypothetical' use, the past tense requires an antecedent; the reference time for an event or situation must be available (Reichenbach 1947, Allen 1966, McCawley 1971). It is therefore always appropriate with a report to ask 'when?' and to expect that an answer can be given. This may be a period rather than a point of time, but the period must be closed. Although/informative writing the period is closed in by virtue of being in the past, in fiction it may be an

imaginary time, or even a period in the future. This apparent counter-example is explained by considering the function of the discourse. A report is essentially factual, in that it deals with propositions for which it is, at least theoretically, possible to assign a truth value. However, since we cannot 'know' the future, a report is also inevitably retrospective. Fiction is, in Searle's terms, 'pretended assertion' (Searle 1979, chap. 3). Although the time sphere of fiction may not be the real past, it is always the 'pretend' past. Fiction located in the future differs from prediction, not in the objective time involved, but in the illocutionary act performed. Thus the use of past tense forms in such cases indicates that the function of a text may be more important in determining the tense used than the objective time of the action.

Although report and description were the major macro-functions identified in the corpus, it is clear that there are also other macrofunctions which need to be described. There were, for example, three imperative verb forms with an 'instructional' function, eg.

(23) Consider the evaluation of the geographical space surrounding an urban centre. (D195)

In other types of text, such as workshop manuals, this macro-function would be of far greater importance. Apart from the use of imperative verb forms, other characteristics would include use of modals, especially 'should' and 'must', and of passive verb groups. Other possible macro-functions are commentary, hypothesis and prediction. Commentary, since it deals with events taking place at the moment of utterance, is uncommon in written discourse (except in personal letters and in fiction). A detailed account of the characteristics of texts of this nature is given by Jooß 1964.

There were no instances of commentary in the corpus, but hypothesis and prediction occurred several times. However, these two macro-functions seem more suitably

described at a lower level of analysis than report and description, since they occur as part of a text which can be identified as having the overall function of report or description, and exhibit the features of the 'dominating' (macro-function, Prediction, for example, is characterised by the use of modals, particularly 'will', but the tense is determined by its occurrence in report, as in (27), or description, as in (28):

(24) The coming of independence could in those days seem a climatic movement dividing the past from an altogether different future when all things would be possible. (C16)

(25) It is feasible to rank the members of a social system in terms of wealth on the basis of readily accessible criteria available in the tax returns, although such rankings will not be free of errors. (B79)

With hypothesis the situation is more complex. In description counterfactuality is indicated by past tense, and this applies also to modal verb groups with a predictive function which fall within scope of hypothesis:

(26) If ... resources were completely immobile within an area then changed conditions or demand and technology would have to be met by the internal adjustment of industrial structure. (D180-181)

However, the boundary between simple description and hypothesis is not always so clear, as in (27):

(27) If factors are perfectly mobile then the locational changes in demand and production technology would take place automatically. (D178-197)

In a report it appears that the use of the perfect indicates counterfactuality, as in (28):

(28) An isolated nationality such as the Karimojong ... suddenly found themselves transferred into the nation-state of Uganda. It might as well have been that of Kenya, Sudan, or Congo. (C217)

However, it may be that the counterfactuality is indicated, as in description, by the past tense, and that the perfect form serves to locate the event at a time prior to the time of utterance, an interpretation which is suggested by sentences such as:

(30) The train may have been cancelled. There were insufficient instances of hypothesis and prediction in the corpus to allow further analysis, but these cases indicate that it might be fruitful to investigate the interrelationships between various macro-functions, and the linguistic realisation when one macro-function is subsumed under another.

In general, the primary distinction between report, characterised by past tense, and description, characterised by present tense, held true throughout the corpus, and was not affected by changes in function at lower levels of analysis. If this distinction is valid, then it should be possible to identify a change of macro-function whenever there is a change of tense. This is most clearly shown when several verb forms of each type cluster together, as in the example below:

(31) The way children learn the rules shows a remarkable consistency. Whether they are fast learners or slow, ... they are seen to acquire knowledge of the rules in a predictable order. In the study of the three children illustrated in Figure 4-1, for example, a careful record was kept of the age at which they showed an ability to use morphemes that have grammatical significance. (B220-226)

There is a clear distinction in terms of function between the first two sentences, in which present tense is used, and the third sentence which contains past tense forms. Not only is this a distinction

between description and report, but also, at a lower level of analysis, between 'general statement' and 'simplification'. The change in tense evidently coincides with a functional boundary.

The last verb form in (31), however is in present tense, got it occurs within the report section, and does not seem to involve a change of macro-function. The first point to make here is that although we have identified report and description as macro-functions, they may also occur at lower levels of analysis. Thus the second part of (31), though a report as a whole, contains a single act which is descriptive in nature, and thus occurs in present tense. However, it is not purely descriptive; by virtue of its relationship with the co-text it also contributes to the report. For this reason, the text would remain acceptable if the verb form 'had' was used in place of 'have'; the only difference would be that the utterance no longer had a double function, but a single one. This phenomenon relates to the flexibility inherent in the notion of current applicability. In a report, the focus of interest is a closed period of time in the past; consequently the past tense is appropriate for any event or situation occurring within the period, whether or not it also holds at the moment of utterance. However, the speaker or writer also has the option of presenting a proposition as currently applicable, even though it simultaneously constitutes part of a report, and thus he may choose to use a present tense form to indicate this. In language teaching, it would seem advisable to teach the use of past tense in such contexts, so that special rules are not needed in the description of verb form meaning. The optional use of present tense forms could be introduced much later, when the basic verb system has been mastered.

In the case above, it was possible to use either present or past tense, since both report and description would have been functionally appropriate in view of the co-text and the propositional content of the utterance. However, isolated verb forms of a particular tense do not always occur in contexts where such a 'double function' is possible. In these cases, the change in tense simply parallels a change in function at a low level of analysis. For example, in (32), the writer interrupts a description to give a cross-reference; since this refers to an earlier portion of the text, it is presented as a report.

- (32) According to Weber, power may be defined as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance..." The bases of power relationships were treated in general terms in the discussion of the strength of the norm sender. (B105)

In (33), a report is interrupted while the writer inserts his own comment on the epistemic status of the proposition; in other words, he describes his own attitude.

- (33) The literate, especially the writers, began to speak in voices of their own. Many of them, one feels, shared the perceptions of a poem of 1957.... (C71)

'Isolated' verb forms, it should be remembered, were extremely infrequent in the corpus. Of 981 finite verb groups, only 15 were not accompanied by another verb in the same tense, either in the same or an adjacent sentence. Although we need to recognise that function may change at micro-level as well as at macro-level, with a corresponding change of tense, nonetheless the overall picture for informative writing is clear: discourse is arranged in stretches which have the same macro-function and the same tense. This basic regularity, it is suggested, provides a better framework for the teaching of verb form meaning than the traditional approach.

(33) The literate, especially the writers, began to speak in voices of their own. Many of them, one feels, shared the perceptions of a poem of 1957....

Section 5

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

If the above account presents an accurate picture of tense use in English, then it has several implications for the teaching of this area. Firstly, the traditional emphasis on time of occurrence as the determinant of tense is shown to be misleading; tense is a reflection of the overall function of the text, rather than the temporal location of a specific event or situation. Clearly there must be some reference to time, since a major distinction between report and description is that the former relates to a closed period of time in the past, and the latter to an undefined period including the movement of utterance. Nevertheless, macro-function should be taken as the primary determinant, since in this way the basic rules which are established will cover the various exceptions which arise from a temporally - based description. Moreover, a functional approach allows tense to be treated as a unitary feature; verb groups in description will all be in present tense, although they may also be modal, perfect, or continuous. If time of occurrence is given prominence in the presentation of verb form meaning, each verb form combination has to be dealt with separately.

It follows that in teaching tense use, each tense must be firmly associated with the appropriate macro-function. In order to make this association, it is necessary to deal with connected texts rather than single sentences. In an isolated sentence, it is frequently the case that either present or past tense may be used; there is no means of deciding between the two in cases such as 'John (CATCH) the bus at the corner'. Consequently, tense use is often taught using examples in which one or the other tense is required by

adverbial specification, and language textbooks tend to incorporate gap-filling exercises of the type:

Yesterday John (CATCH) ... the bus at the corner

John usually (CATCH).... the bus at the corner

This sort of presentation distorts language use, since it is by no means the case that verb forms are determined by adverbials. While there are some obligatory collocations (such as the use of the present perfect with 'up to now'), most adverbials may occur with a variety of verb forms, and of course many sentences do not contain an adverbial specifier at all. The student is, in effect, taught a mechanical rule of very limited applicability, which reveals its inadequacy once he moves beyond tightly controlled classroom exercises.

If connected texts are used, there is no need for this kind of distortion. Tense use will be determined by the function of the text as whole, and this function can be made clear to students in a variety of ways. Adverbial specification is only one of these ways. As already mentioned, a report must relate to a definite period of time in the past, which may be indicated by an temporal adverbial. One adverbial, however, may provide a reference time for several sentences, not only for the sentence in which it appears. Thus, if a paragraph begins with the words 'In 1914', we immediately anticipate a historical report, in which all the verbs will be in past tense. However, the function of a text may also be evident from pragmatic knowledge; despite the lack of adverbial specification, it is clear, for example, that (34) is the beginning of a report, and (35) the beginning of a description:

(34) The Second World War (CAUSE) many hardships

(35) Hydrogen (BE) a colourless gas:

Once the concepts of report and description have been established, they can be referred to explicitly, and associated with particular language purposes. Students might be asked, for instance, how a simple experiment would be presented in a chemistry textbook, and how they would present the same information after completing the experiment. In such ways, tense use can be shown to reflect macro-function. Moreover, it is only through the use of connected texts that students can be made aware of the cohesive nature of tense, and the consequent consistency of tense use in discourse.

In the teaching of description, it should be emphasised that the text presents characteristics of the topic. Using this approach, it is unnecessary to make an explicit distinction between the 'habitual' and 'unrestrictive' uses of the present tense (Leech 1971), a distinction which arises not from the verb form itself, but from pragmatic knowledge. In general, states occur with the unrestrictive interpretation, and events with the habitual interpretation, but this is a feature of the whole situation, not of the verb form alone. In (36) and (37) for example, the difference in interpretation is based on our knowledge of the kinds of meeting that go on between rivers and between people, rather than any feature of the verb:

(36) The Avon meets the Severn at Tewkesbury

(37) Tom meets his friends at Tewkesbury

There are, moreover, situations intermediate between states and events; these 'processes', like states, have intrinsic duration with no determinate end point, but like events, are regarded as 'happening' rather than 'existing'. In description, processes may be seen either as extending indefinitely or as occurring habitually. The distinction again is a pragmatic one; thus 'John breathes badly' would normally be interpreted as unrestrictive, and 'John smokes cigars' as habitual.

Some times these distinction break down completely.

I may, for example, say of a food processor that 'It slices vegetables', even if it has never in fact done so. Is this use habitual or unrestricted? We may note that in sentences describing general properties, the use of an adverbial of frequency is often inappropriate, as in:

(38) ? Sodium always melts to a colourless liquid

(39) ? Omnivores always eat a variety of food

If the action is genuinely habitual, this anomaly is difficult to account for. In actual use, the distinction between habitual and unrestricted uses of the simple present is often blurred. I find it impossible, for example, to categorise the verbs in the extract below:

(40) Language makes life experiences cumulative.....

Cultural evolution takes off at a rate that leaves biological evolution far behind. (A51-53)

What is clear, however, is that these situations are represented as being characteristic of language, and that it is this, rather than the precise temporal specification of a situation, which is crucial in description.

In teaching description, then, the use of present tense should be associated with characteristic features of the topic, and little emphasis should be placed on the temporal location of the events and situations described. In particular, the use of adverbial specifiers should not be presented in a distorted way, but should reflect their occurrence in authentic discourse. Tense should be regarded as a feature of the text as a whole, associated with its macro-function.

By contrast, temporal location should be seen a crucial feature of a report, which must relate to a definite period of time. For this reason, it might be advisable to introduce report in a historical context, where the temporal location is in no doubt. Fictional reports,

located in an imaginary period of time, ma, then be introduced at a later stage. Although it is important to associate reports with a definite period of time, the tendency to rely exclusively on adverbial specification should be avoided. Allen 1966 discusses the ways in which an event may be 'identified' in time. Apart from adverbial specification, he includes reference to a unique event, as in (41), to an event in the shared experience of the participants (42), to an event which has occurred in the immediate context (43), and to an event which has already been introduced (44):

- (41) Napoleon died on St. Helena.
 (42) "I am so glad we did it when we did."
 (43) "What did you say?"
 (44) "I've been to the Guggenheim Museum only once."
 "How did you like it?"

Although (43) is almost exclusively a conversational use, the other methods of identifying an event in time can be exploited in designing exercises based on written texts, reflecting authentic language use.

A further method by which an event may be identified is through its position in the co-text itself. In a report, one sentence frequently deals with an event which occurs after events presented in the preceding sentences, and this relationship of sequence is not necessarily indicated by adverbial specification. The example below illustrates the shifting point of reference in a report:

(45) Mompong was defeated and reacted by placing herself under British protection. Nkoranza now asserted her independence. Britsin, of course, welcomed this collapse of centralized Asante power and made separate treaties with the chiefs wherever possible.⁹

The main intersentential relationship occurs in the description, although in this case the sequence is not

... tied to a particular time, but occurs on different occasions within the time-sphere of the present, as in (46):

(46) ... insect-eating bats in flight emit very high pitched squeaks ... These squeaks are reflected by objects in the path of the bat, and the resulting echo is heard by its extremely sensitive ears. This tells the bat the exact position and nature of the object ...

Although there may be explicit indicators of sequence in a text, the recognition of sequential relationships is often based on pragmatic knowledge. In the early stages, learners should be made aware of the temporal relationships between sentences within the same text, and sensitised to the distinction between situations in sequence, and those taking place simultaneously. Various exercise types can be devised based on the temporal ordering of information, in which tense use can be practised in connection with the notion of temporal coherence in paragraph structure. Again, the emphasis should be on tense, not as the indication of time of occurrence of a particular event, but as a reflection of the macro-function of a text.

In the account of verb form meaning given in this paper, tense is seen as the opposition between present and past, and thus applies to all verb form combinations. The initial teaching of tense use should focus on simple forms, but once the distinction between report, using past tense, and description, using present tense, has been established, other verb forms can be dealt with. These should be presented within the context of report or description, and their tense form, as shown by the first word of the verb group, should be associated with the appropriate macro-function, in the same way as for simple forms.

... 63 ...

It can then be demonstrated that other features of the verb group are associated with specific meanings, that, for example, 'will' indicates prediction, 'can' may indicate ability, BE-ing (continuous) presents an event as in progress at a particular point of time, and so on. In this way, while pointing out the special features of various verb form combinations, the notion of consistency of tense within discourse is still retained.

This investigation of tense use in English is based on an analysis of written texts, and in the discussion of teaching strategies it has so far been assumed that tense use will be taught in the context of written information. We must now consider the use of tense in spoken discourse. Report and description are both informative uses of language, and in contexts where it is appropriate for information to be given in spoken utterances of some length, then the points already made will apply equally to spoken discourse. For example, a teacher, a tourist guide, a demonstrator in a store or a travel agent may in the course of their work produce informative utterances which will exhibit consistency of tense use according to macrofunction. In conversations concerned with the seeking and imparting of factual information, tense use will also frequently be consistent, although this may be to some extent masked by the allocation of turns between different participants. Once tense use has been established in informative discourse, the basic principles can be extended to apply to questions as well as declarative sentences. Thus under description we must include both describing and finding out about characteristics, and under report, both reporting and finding out about events and situations located in a past period of time.

... ..

Frequently, however conversation is not concerned primarily with factual information, but involves other functions such as ~~interaction~~, requesting, greeting, inviting and apologising (Wilkins 1976, Van Ek 1978). Certain features of the verb group will need to be associated with non-informative functions. Imperative verb forms, commands, requests, invitations and warnings, and there are various uses of modals associated with, for example, requests, advice and permission. In addition, the use of the past tense as an indicator of politeness in such acts will also have to be covered.

Nonetheless, the current emphasis on communicative function should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the vast majority of utterances, whatever their primary function, also carry factual information. For example, the utterance 'I'm terribly sorry, but I forgot to post your letter' constitutes an apology, but it also reports a past event; similarly 'Those mushrooms are poisonous' may be used as a warning, but still describes characteristics of the mushrooms. The basic function of tense in the verb is, as we have suggested, to indicate the applicability of a proposition; that is, it is concerned principally with propositional rather than social meaning. The teaching of tense through informative discourse seems therefore the most effective approach. Once the basic rules have been established in texts with the macro-function of report or description, they can then be demonstrated at micro-level, where individual utterances constituting report or description occur as part of a text with a different function.

The suggested method of introducing the use of tense in English is through connected texts with the macro-function of either report (past tense) or description (present tense), containing simple verb forms which are

△*for example, occur with many kinds of directive act, including

consistent in tense throughout the text. Once this pattern has been established, it can be elaborated by using texts in which different verb form combinations occur, and those in which there is a change in macro-function; by demonstrating the use of present and past tense at micro-level, occurring within texts of a different macro-function; and by dealing with other uses such as the 'hypothetical' and polite use of the past tense, and the use of present tense in commentary. The emphasis throughout should be on the regularity of tense use, related to the internal coherence of discourse.

Section 6

CONCLUSION

The traditional approach to verb form meaning tends to stress irregularities rather than regularities. It

distinguishes the various different uses that a particular verb form may have in different contexts, thus obscuring general similarities in meaning across all contexts.

By associating tense primarily with time of occurrence, it is forced to deal separately with each verb form combination despite the generalisations that can be made about each grammatical opposition in the verb group.

Furthermore, the emphasis on time of occurrence necessitates treating 'sequence of tenses' by separate rules, yet still leaves various exceptions unaccounted for.

In authentic discourse, however, we find that there is a marked consistency in tense use, and that this correlates with the macro-function of the text. There are many advantages in teaching tense use in connection with macro-function rather than time of occurrence. The description is simpler, easier to grasp, and has wider generalisability. This approach also encourages in learners, from the beginning, an awareness of the coherence of discourse.

The emphasis on function is in line with a communicative approach to language teaching. So far, functional syllabuses have tended to concentrate on the social functions of language at the expense of informative functions. The Threshold Level syllabus, for example, lists 'reporting (including describing and narrating)' as just one function, and the first of the two exponents given is simply 'declarative sentence' (Van Ek & Alexander 1975). This imbalance in syllabus specification is potentially dangerous, particularly for the many learners who require English specifically for access to information.¹¹ It perhaps arises from the tendency to analyse functions at a relatively low level of analysis (examples given are usually at sentence level or lower), and to list them in isolation, with no indication of how they may interrelate in discourse (Widdowson 1977). In the emphasis on illocutionary meaning, there is too little attention to propositional meaning, which is, with very few exceptions, essential to the interpretation of an utterance. The grammar and lexis of a language represent primarily the resources for creating propositional meaning, and grammatical competence is thus an essential component of communicative competence. Wilkins 1976 acknowledges the need to incorporate the development of grammatical competence within a functionally-based course, but give little indication of how this might actually be achieved in practice. This investigation of tense use in English suggests that, in at least one area of grammar, there is no conflict between grammatical and functional competence. If attention is directed away from low level functions, towards the macro-function of a text, tense use can be taught 'communicatively', rather than mechanically. Such an approach, however, does not depend on a particular pedagogical theory, but can also be justified on its own merits.

1 McCawley 1971, Quirk et al 1972 and Van Dijk 1977 mention the role of tense in sentence connection though only briefly. Halliday & Hasan 1976 discuss tense only in relation to ellipsis. There is, as far as I know, no systematic treatment of tense as a cohesive element in discourse.

2 The four texts analysed were:

- A: Kagan J & E Havermann 1976 Psychology: An Introduction, 3rd edition New York Harcourt Brace Jovanovich pages 121-127
- B: Aubert V 1967 Elements of Sociology London Heinemann pages 100-109
- C: Davidson B 1978 Africa in Modern History London Penguin pages 283-291
- D: Hodder B W & R Lee 1974 Economic Geography London Methuen pages 84-93

The books were opened at random, and the pages turned back until a chapter beginning was reached. The 250th finite verb group was located, and the text was cut at the paragraph ending nearest to this verb group.

3 This figure excludes three imperative verb forms found in the corpus

4 In addition to the 'historical' use of the present, there are also examples such as 'I hear he's left', or in broadcasting, 'The report comes to you from Berlin'.

5 The use of the term 'description' is not entirely satisfactory, since it has a wider meaning than that required here. However, it seems to be the only appropriate term that could also be used with learners. Throughout this paper, 'description' will be taken in the narrow sense as defined here.

6 The same point is made by Jespersen 1933, who says, 'If the present tense is used, it is because the sentences are valid now; the linguistic tense-expression says nothing about the length of the duration before or after the present moment!' (1933p238)

7 In fact, of course, both present and past tense are still appropriate in this context, but it seems to be a convenient fiction of language teaching that adverbials of frequency act as the 'trigger' for a present tense form.

- 8 These distinctions were first formalised by Vendler 1967; the terminology used here derives from Mourelatos 1978.
- 9 Sagay J O & D A Wilson 1978 Africa: A Modern History London Evans Bros p 227
- 10 Bere R M 1975 Mammals of East and Central Africa London Longman p48
- 11 George 1981 comments that 'present-day fashion is back to Mr Berlitz's tourist-oriented dialogues of the late 1980s; and the learners will not be able to read.'

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A number of questions are raised about the above...
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