Maintenance of tense and control of tense alternation in four types of text. Analysis of texts written by children aged 10 to 14

DOLZ-MESTRE, Joaquim, ROSAT, Marie-Claude, SCHNEUWLY, Bernard

WRITING:
TRENDS IN EUROPEAN RESEARCH

Proceedings of the International Workshop on Writing (Padova, Italy, 3-4 December 1988)

Edited by:

PIETRO BOSCOLO

Università di Padova

UPSEL EDITORE
WRITING:

TRENDS IN EUROPEAN RESEARCH

Proceedings of the International Workshop on Writing (Padova, Italy, 3-4 December 1988)

Edited by:

PIETRO BOSCOLO

Università di Padova
MAINTENANCE OF TENSE AND CONTROL OF TENSE ALTERNATION IN
FOUR TYPES OF TEXT.
ANALYSIS OF TEXTS WRITTEN BY CHILDREN AGED 10 TO 14

Joaquim Dolz, Marie-Claude Rosat, Bernard Schneuwly
University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

Summary

In this paper, we observe how pupils use tenses and tense systems in different text types. In this perspective, texts produced in three languages, French, German and Catalan, by 30 subjects of three age groups (10, 12 and 14 years old), in four communication situations (fairy-tale, short news item, letter) are analyzed.

Referring to theories developed in text linguistics and in psychology of language, problems with respect to maintenance of a basic tense and to alternation with other tenses are interpreted as a trace of psychological operations, mainly enunciative anchorage, text planning and cohesion of tenses.

1. PROBLEM

The domain of tenses is a central topic in mother tongue education and in teaching of languages. But the result of the efforts made in school seem not to have the desired effects in writing texts: use of tenses remains a domain which is difficult to master for a great number of pupils. The texts of children and the remarks made by teachers are the prove. How often one can find expressions like "temps" or "mélange de temps" in the compositions of pupils!

To analyze and comprehend the functioning of tenses in children's texts, we refer to several contemporary approaches in text linguistics (Beneveniste, 1966; Weinrich, 1973; Adam, 1976) and in psychology of language (Bronckart & al., 1985). Our point of view is textual, opposed to the traditional approaches which analyze sentences out of cotext and
context; it is \textit{contrasting}, i.e. we try to take in account the variety of communicative situations and the differences of texts corresponding to them; it is \textit{genetic}, which means that we look at the speech production system as a construction.

The general goal of our present work on tenses is to study empirically their functioning in texts produced in 4 contrasted production situations in different languages. Preceding studies (Bronckart & Fayol, 1985; Fayol, 1985; Bronckart, 1985; Dolz, 1986) have shown that five factors seem to influence the use of tenses in texts:

a) the \textit{degree of perfectivity} of the processes described by the verbs;

b) the \textit{enunciative anchorage} of texts i.e. the relationship between the physical discourse setting (locutors, moment and place of discourse production; the \textit{hic and nunc}) on one hand and content and forms of social interaction on the other hand;

c) the \textit{text planning}, i.e. the organization of texts in parts through scripts, narrative schemata, argumentative schemata, ...

d) the \textit{temporal marking} of events in function of the axis defined by the enunciative anchorage;

e) the \textit{cohesion of tenses}, i.e. the repetitions and changes of tenses in the chain of verbs.

In this study, we shall concentrate on \textit{enunciative anchorage}, \textit{text planning} and \textit{cohesion of tenses} through the analysis of the maintenance of a basic tense or tense system in a text and the control of alternations of tenses in the text. We will try to answer the following questions: Which are the tense systems used in texts produced in different communication situations? Do pupils have difficulties to maintain a basic tense or tense system? What are the reasons for changing a basic tense or tense system? Our hypothesis is that pupils have some difficulties to use tenses according to the norms in a given language, but that often unexpected changes can be explained by factors such as change of enunciative anchorage, text structuring and for- and backgrounding, factors acting also in texts written by experts.

These questions are the same for different languages. In our contribution, we will discuss the results for three languages: German, French
and Catalan. Linguists agree without problem on the paradigm of tenses in these languages. For our study we will analyze: Präsens (PR) Perfekt (PFK) and Präteritum (PRT) in German; présent, passé composé (PC) passé simple (PS) and imparfait (IMP) in French; and present, indefinit, parfait simple, imperfet and perfet perifrásic (PP) in Catalan. We expect that these languages will differ in the manner in which they resolve the problem of anchoring a text. It is possible that the role tenses play in structuring a text is different as well.

2. METHOD

We will study texts produced by 30 pupils aged 10, 12 and 14 in the following four controlled communication situations: pupils have to write a) a traditional fairy-tail for a younger child; b) a short news item on an unexpected event for a newspaper; c) an explanation on the functioning of a canal lock for a child who has never seen any; d) a letter for a comrade in a parallel class on a event experienced recently. Pupils produce their texts, except the letters, after the projection of a mute video-movie remembering what has to be written. In all texts, the content is a chronological sequence of events. Note that control of content allows us to elaborate a grid for devising texts in parts.

In our communication, we will present the results of three types of analysis: an analysis of relative frequencies of tenses to see which are characteristic for each text type written by the pupils (for details see: Dolz et al., 1987); a factorial analysis of correspondences (FAC) which produces a classification of texts in function of basic tenses or tense systems; a qualitative analysis of the factors governing tense alternation in the texts showing a mixed pattern of tense systems. We will discuss the data in the light of a psychological model of text production.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Tense and tense systems in 4 text types

In all languages, the explanation differs from the other three text types by the absolute dominance of present tense (German: 95%; French:
70%; Catalan: 75%). The text are very homogeneous; there are no phenomena of tense alternation. This result was of course expected.

The table 1 gives the results for the main tenses appearing in the three remaining text types.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PRT</th>
<th>PR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fairy tale</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news items</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letter</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PS</th>
<th>IMP</th>
<th>PC</th>
<th>PR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fairy tale</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news items</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letter</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PP</th>
<th>IMP</th>
<th>PR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fairy tale</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news items</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letter</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Relative frequencies of tenses in % of total verbs in three languages and in three text types

The data can be described as follows: In German and Catalan, one tense is dominant in all text types: PRT on one hand, PP on the other. The dominance is much more marked in German, but we will see that in Catalan, PP and IMP function generally together as system; this means that the two languages have really only one dominant tense system in the three communication situations. In French on the other hand, the distribution of tenses and tense systems is different for each text type: absolute dominance of PS/IMP in the fairy tale; similar frequencies of PS/IMP and PR on one hand, with a certain amount of verbs in PC on the other, in the news items; and dominance of PC/IMP and PR in the letters.

These data are clearly not precise enough to have an idea on how the texts function in the different situations, or, in other words, which are the tenses appearing together as systems and which is the frequency of the texts with a particular system in function of text types. To get this information, we applied a FAC which gave the results summarized in table 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PRT(PR/PC)</th>
<th>MIXTE</th>
<th>PR</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fairy tale</td>
<td>85(6)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news items</td>
<td>80(28)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letter</td>
<td>56(24)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PS/IMP</td>
<td>MIXTEPC/IMP</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fairy tale</td>
<td>71(26)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news items</td>
<td>37(16)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letter</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PP/IMP/PS</td>
<td>MIXTE</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(PS DOMINANT)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fairy tale</td>
<td>75(6)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news items</td>
<td>67(6)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letter</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Classification of texts according to the dominant tense system.

The main features of the data are the following: German and Catalan react quite similarly to the communication situations: the same tense system, PRT in German and PP/IMP in Catalan, is dominant in all three situations; the number of texts mixing tense systems is higher in the letters than in the other texts. In comparison to German, Catalan seems to have more mixed texts in fairy tales and news items, and more texts with PR as dominant system in all three text types. Note that in Catalan, certain texts have PS/IMP as dominant system; it is a possible variant of PP/IMP.

The French texts show a very different pattern: In the fairy tales, the tense system PS/IMP is largely dominant, but there are also a certain amount of texts in the PR and with mixed tense systems. In the news items, the system PS/IMP is still the most important in comparison to the other systems, but it covers not even half of the texts; mixed texts, texts in the PC/IMP system and text in the PR are quite important as well. In the letters finally, the dominant system is PC/IMP. The other systems are much less frequent.

The table shows also that an important number of texts with a dominant system contain tenses of other systems (PR/PC in the PRT text in German; PR in French; we find the same phenomenon in Catalan).

Two questions need a more thorough analysis to be answered: 1. What are the rules governing tense and tense system alternations in the mixed texts? 2. What factors contribute to the appearance of more local
tokens of tenses of a different system? A closer look at the texts, type by type, will give us some elements to answer these questions.

3.2. Factors of tense alternation

Fairy tales

In all three languages, we find a similar functioning of texts mixing tense systems: in the majority of cases, the transition from one system (PRT, PS/IMP, PP/IMP) to another one (PR in general), or vice versa, occurs at a major points of transition in the story structure: initial situation, end of first episode, second or third episode. In other words: in mixed texts we don’t generally find an arbitrary distribution of tenses of different systems, except in a few texts, but an episode or a significant part of an episode written in using another tense system.

The local usage of tenses from another tense system appears generally at particular places of the text; again, the factors governing these uses are the same in the three languages: opening of the fairy tale; commentary of the speaker; expression of one single culminating event; verbs introducing direct speech or depending from a speech act verb. In certain cases, one observes the transition to PR after a dialogue passage.

News items

For the texts mixing the tense systems, we find a functioning very similar to the fairy tales: the change from one system to an other occurs at significant points of transition in the text (culminating point in the first or in the second episode; or passage from the summary of the story to the story itself). One text in German shows a more original pattern: the alternation of tense systems seem to depend on the change of actor in the text (policeman in PR, car driver in PRT).

More local changes of tense systems are significant as well. The most important one concerns the change after one or two introductory utterances which often summarize the story, or at the end of the text, making the transition to a current state of affairs. Note that this functioning is also possible in the texts with the dominant PR; in this case the PC, PRT, PP or
PS are the contrastive unit. Like in the fairy tales, we find the dependence of tense choice from verb types (speech act verbs) and some changes without apparent reason.

*Letters*

In the letters, the significance of mixing tense systems is totally different from the two other texts. The communication situation itself imposes the change: on one hand pupils have to create contact with their sibling, on the other hand, they have to tell a story. These two different aims determine the choice of two tense systems in the texts. Depending on the degree and the length to which the discursive or narrative parts are realized (sometimes presentation, questions, descriptions of person are longer than the story and vice versa), we get more or less mixed texts. This use of the tense systems has the consequence that changes other than local ones in the narrative part are almost impossible; on the other hand, a narrative part is almost necessarily marked by a change in tense system. Texts written exclusively in PR contain generally no narrative part.

There are nevertheless some local changes of tense system in the narrative part. These are generally due to the fact that the writer refers to a current fact (description of an object or a person close to the writer).

4. DISCUSSION

Our results and observations have to be discussed at three levels at least: 1. Which factors determine the choice of a basic tense or tense system in a given communication situation and in a given language? This problem concerns the *enunciative anchorage*. 2. Which factors regulate global alternations of tense systems in a text? This question has to do with the *planning of text*. 3. Which factors govern more local changes? This aspect has to do with textualisation, or linearization in a strict sense; one can also call it the problem of *cohesion in the chain of verbs*. Note that our method is not precise enough to give definite answers to these questions. But we think, that it can show some possible hypotheses and exclude some others.
4.1. Enunciative anchorage

In his already classical analysis, Benveniste (1966) defines two tense sub-systems in French language, corresponding to two discourse types: PR, PC, FUT and IMP for the "discourse" on one hand, having a deictic relation to the physical discourse setting; PS, IMP for the "histoire" on the other hand, telling the events without relation to the hic et nunc "as if they would tell themselves". Weinrich (1973) generalized these notions to other languages distinguishing two attitudes the enunciator can adopt towards the actions described: commentary and narration. He also assigns two tense sub-systems to each type of attitude.

Our data and observations confirm the necessity to define an enunciative anchorage for a given text or part of text. This is particularly clear in the letters where the transition from one sub-system to another corresponds to a change of enunciative anchorage. But two problems at least appear when one tries to interpret our data with an approach distinguishing two tense sub-systems corresponding to two types of anchorage:

1. Obviously, there are more than two sub-systems, in at least one language: French (perhaps the same is true for Catalan with the PS/IMP). This can be explained in two ways: the same type of anchorage can be realized by different sub-systems; or: there are more than two types of enunciative anchorage. If the second hypothesis is true - and we clearly prefer this second one (Bronckart et al., 1985) - than we have to ask the inverse question: does a language with two tense sub-systems distinguish two types of anchorage, or realize more types with only two sub-systems?

2. Text types normally correspond to a certain choice of anchoring and therefore to a certain tense sub-system: PRT, or PS/IMP for the fairy tales; PR for explication, and so forth. For each text type one can find exceptions: in the texts we analyzed as well as in texts written by experts. There are degrees of freedom in the choice of anchoring corresponding to a text type and in the manner of realization of a given type of anchoring. This possibility of choice is probably influenced by the representation the enunciator has of the type of addressee and of the aim given.

From the point of view of the conception of a psychological language production model, our data confirm thus the necessity to postulate an oper-
ation level on which decisions are taken concerning the type of enunciative anchoring of a given text or part of text with regard to the material hic and nunc. This operation defines an axis along which states or events are situated. The two questions opened by the data on different languages and on different similar text types however need further research with other methods.

4.2. Planning of text

In all three languages we have found texts which mix massively tenses belonging to different systems. The analysis of these alternations show that it is necessary to postulate mechanism of control of tense production which are situated on a textual level. Our data show that we are far away from a situation in which the simple mechanism of passage from commentary to narration could explain the changes of tenses systems, as Weinrich (1973) postulates. It is necessary to distinguish at least two cases:

a) The first case corresponds to what we have discussed in the preceding paragraph: the change of tense sub-systems corresponds to a change of enunciative anchorage. We have already given the example of the letters. More generally, one can find discursive parts in all narrative texts we have analyzed: commentaries, evaluations, codas, meta-linguistic utterances, summaries and so forth. One should add the dialogue parts we didn't analyze in this study.

b) Most transitions in the fairy tales and in the news items however are obviously related to the structure of the texts: changes of episode, parts of episode, type of actor, culminating points in the story are pointed out. In these cases, the factor explaining the change is not anchorage but control and planning of text structure in view of its communicative function.

In traditional studies, the effect of dramatization created by the use of present tense in a context of a past tense has already been underlined (Grevisse, 1980; first edition: 1936). The use of tense system alternations as a means of text structuring has been analyzed in several recent studies in linguistics (Mellet, 1980; De Both-Diez, 1985). Mellet for instance shows that in a text in present tense, this latter becomes banal; and it is PS, in French, which is the contrasting tense.
What is important then from this point of view is not so much an absolute semantic value attributed to a tense or tense system, but its contrasting function in a text. And this is calculated on the basis of the text structure and its communicative function. That is exactly what we found in our texts.

The two aspects - anchorage and text planning - are of course related. The coda of a fairy tale is an aspect of text structure and corresponds to a change in enunciative anchoring. In the news items, the differentiation between summary and main text is a structural as well as an enunciative aspect; the same is true for the concluding part. That is the reason why we consider that text anchoring and text planning are the two main aspects of the global "management" of text.

4.3. Cohesion in the chain of verbs

The decision for the choice of a tense form depends thus from global factors. But local factors act also, as we have seen above: syntactic dependance, dependence from a verbal item, verb type, temporal reference. To take an example: the type of action influences the appearance of a PS in French in a text written in PR; this influence acts even more, if the action is situated in an important part of the text sequence. The alternations IMP-PS in French (Dolz, 1986) or IMP-PP in Catalan, which has not been analyzed here, show clearly the interaction of the different factors.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis of maintenance and alternation of tenses in 4 text types and 3 languages shows a complex mechanism which is part of a global language production system. In a very simplified way, one could summarize the principal findings in proposing a model combining at least three levels of functioning in language activity (see also: Schneuwly, 1988):

1. The base of orientation of language activity is a project which defines a representation of the social institution, the aim and the relation enunciator/addressee; the project depends on an objective task which functions as matrix for the activity. Decisions about text type seem to be taken at this level.
2. On a second level, one can distinguish operations which serve the
global "managing of texts". Concerning choice of tense and tense systems,
we have to distinguish enunciative anchorage which defines a temporal axis
on which states and events can be situated on one hand, planning of text
structure and its communicative function on the other hand. Both aspects
interact with each other.

3. In addition to these factors, the construction of the final chain of
verb tenses on the level of linearization or textualization takes in account at
least type of verb, syntactic dependencies and temporal reference.

The differences between the languages we analyzed in this study
are particularly marked on the level of anchoring; local factors also are taken
in account in different ways. Text structure however seems to have similar
influences in the different languages analyzed.

There is not enough space and time here to expose the genetic
aspects of our study. Important differences exist between pupils of different
ages, namely in the mastering of global and local transitions. Their concrete
realization in our texts is often very far away from what one can find in the
texts of experts. It is however remarkable to see that one can find already a
very subtle use of tenses and tense systems and that the texts function
following comparable principles to texts one can take as reference. I this
sense, tense alternations and maintenance seem more to be a competence
to develop than a difficulty to correct.

Geneva, decembre 1988

REFERENCES

Adam, J.M. (1976) Langue et texte: imparfait et passé simple. Pratiques, 10,
49-68.

Benveniste, E. (1966) Les relations de temps dans le verbe français. In:
Problèmes de linguistique générale, Paris: Gallimard.

De Both-Diez, A.-M. (1980) L’aspect et ses implications dans le
fonctionnement de l’imparfait, du passé simple et du passé composé
au niveau textuel. Langue française, 67, 5-22.


