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ON THE ACQUISITION OF TENSE . . .

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Abstract

There are several hypotheses put forth to explain how tense systems are acquired in second languages. In this paper I suggest still another one. What I started out with was a contrastive perspective. By using Discourse Representation Theory for the contrastive analysis, I did not only describe the formal differences, but also discovered the similarity between the languages in question.

According to DRT there is a parallel in the way in which pronouns and tense morphemes behave; this has to do with their anaphoric function. In Norwegian it is not possible to have empty anaphors, neither as pronouns nor as tense morphemes. In Vietnamese, on the other hand, empty anaphors of both kinds are very frequent.

I have argued that the difference between preterite and perfect as we find it in Norwegian partly can be described by the distinction between anaphoric and non-anaphoric function. The anaphoric function is to refer to some time already established in the actual universe of discourse. The non-anaphoric function adds new information to the discourse, and that is why it is urgent to express. And since it is more urgent to express the perfect than the preterite the perfect grammaticalizes before the preterite.

Keywords: tense systems, a contrastive perspective, Discourse Representation Theory, anaphoric function, empty anaphors, universe of discourse

In SLA the expression of temporality and the relationship between tense and time have been the subject of several studies. What there seems to be agreement on is that there is a tendency for early second language to have little or no grammatical marking for time and that lexicalization and contextual factors are used to express the temporal location of events, actions and states. Contextual factors encompass both linguistic context and situational context. Learners also obey universal communication principles, such as for example the principle of natural order or Grice's maxim 'be orderly' (Grice 1975: 46). It has also been observed that there is a tendency for lexical past forms of the verb to be used more frequently than inflectional marking of past time in early second language development.

Since my study is based on data from Vietnamese second language learners in Norwegian and since my starting point is a kind of contrastive

analysis, I have of course been especially interested in studies based on data from Vietnamese learners, in particular a study by Charlene Sato (1990) and one by Wolfram et al. (1985). Both these studies discuss why it is that tense systems develop late in the interlanguage of a Vietnamese second language learner. In their explanation of this development both studies include interference from L1. Their discussions of interference concern the phonological level only, however. One of their key arguments for the explanatory power of phonological interference is the fact that Vietnamese does not allow "consonant clusters in syllable-final position" (Sato 1990). This is a plausible hypothesis when the second language is English because verbs inflected in the past tense in English often have a final consonant cluster. In Norwegian, on the other hand, past tense verb forms most often do not have final consonant clusters, and still past tense marking develops very late in the Norwegian second language of Vietnamese learners. If this hypothesis is meant to be a central part, or the basic part of the explanation of a late tense system, then it should not be that difficult to acquire past tense in Norwegian. But tense is notoriously difficult also for Vietnamese learners of Norwegian, so this hypothesis cannot explain why tense is difficult to acquire. This does not mean that the phonological form of a verb is of no interest. But as I see it, the phonological hypothesis can function as a prediction only of what forms of the verb we are most likely to find in IL, not as a prediction of what functions are grammaticalized in a developing interlanguage.

Sato of course also claims that we have to take function into consideration, and part of her explanation of the infrequent or variable use of past tense forms in past time contexts is that there is no communicative pressure on the learner to express past tense because linguistic marking of tense often is redundant (Sato 1990: 61–92). This is an important point, and I will return to it shortly. But first I would like to discuss temporality as a semantic category.

Temporality has to do with the localization in time of an event, process or state. There are various ways of expressing this in different languages. In both Norwegian and Vietnamese a time adverbial can be used to state a specific reference time as in (1).

- (1) Yesterday, I came to Jyväskylä.

In discourse the localization of an event in time may also be contextually given as in (2).

- (2) Uttered driving to the airport (compare Partee 1984: 244):
Oh, I forgot to turn off the coffee machine.

In example (2) there is nothing that expresses that the event described is located in the past except the past tense morpheme. The reference time of this utterance is given by the context, it is not necessary to express it linguistically as in (3).

- (3) Oh, I forgot to turn off the coffee machine when I left for the airport.

In languages like Norwegian and English it is the case that for a sentence to be grammatically acceptable, it must include at least one verb form inflected for tense. This is different from Vietnamese. According to Comrie, most languages of the world have tense (1985: 9). But Vietnamese does not have tense as a grammatical category. Comrie defines tense as "the grammaticalized expression of location in time" (1985: 9). **Preterite** is the grammaticalization of past time and **present** is the grammaticalization of present time. In Norwegian (and English) the past/non-past opposition is a grammaticalized opposition. For each sentence you utter you have to choose which grammatical form is appropriate. Vietnamese, on the other hand, does not grammaticalize the past/non-past opposition. But still there is no problem in determining the localization of events in time in Vietnamese.

Sentences in Vietnamese may be characterized as tenseless. The sentence in (4)

- (4) Tôi đi.
I go

may be translated with either 'I will go', 'I am going' or 'I went' depending on the context. But translation is not the same thing as interpretation. To interpret a sentence, whether it be a sentence like 'Tôi đi' or one like 'I went', you need access to a time referent. So the interpretation of the utterance of a sentence is not to be found only in the semantics of the individual sentence itself, but is also dependent on information that comes from the discourse context. Thus, if we are going to contrast the way Norwegian and Vietnamese express localization of time we have to look at discourse context, not just the individual sentence or the verb forms in isolation.

A semantic theory that focuses not only on the semantics of individual sentences but also the discourse context is Discourse Representation Theory, abbreviated DRT. DRT theorists are especially interested in the intersentential connections and cohesion devices that are responsible for interpretation. Certain linguistic elements require access to surrounding discourse for their interpretation, so-called discourse anaphors. Pronouns are one kind of discourse anaphors. In classical Discourse Representation Theory tense morphemes have also attracted attention as anaphoric elements. The standard reference for the idea that tense morphemes are anaphoric is Partee (1973).

To illustrate the basic meaning of this idea I will use examples from Sandström (1993: 10) to show some characteristic properties of the English past tense that have analogues in the behavior of pronouns. In a sentence like (5) the pronoun *she* is an anaphor which corefers with its antecedent *Sheila*. This antecedent introduces a discourse referent into the universe of discourse. If we continue this discourse as in (6) we do not have to refer to the referent by name once again. Since this referent is already available in the universe of discourse, only the pronoun needs to be expressed.

- (5) Sheila said she would come.
 (6) Sheila said she would come. She didn't however.

A time adverbial like *last Friday* in (7) introduces a time referent to the universe of discourse. A past tense form in the same clause will then be taken to refer to the interval named by that adverbial, just like a pronoun will be taken to corefer with an NP controlling it.

- (7) Last Friday, Sheila gave a party.

So if you go on with a discourse like in (8) you do not have to repeat the time adverbial.

- (8) Last Friday, Sheila gave a party. I didn't go there.

According to the terminology of DRT we have to establish discourse referents in the universe of discourse. We do this by for example characterizing a person or a thing in such a way that the person we are talking to understands who or what we are talking about (Rosén 1993: 134). And when this referent has been established in the universe of discourse, we don't have to characterize it every time we refer to it; we may instead use pronouns.

If you ask the question in (9) during a conversation when a special book is referred to (the examples 9, 10, 12, 13 are from Rosén 1991),

- (9) Where did he lay that book?

you may get an answer like (10):

- (10) He laid it on the table.

But if you should meet a person you have never seen before and he addresses you and says:

- (11) He laid it on the table, now it's gone.

you would probably think he is kind of crazy, because he is speaking to you as if the two of you had already established some common referents in the domain of discourse.

Many languages may be characterized as pro-drop languages. These languages can drop pronouns when there is no other possible referent in the universe of discourse. Vietnamese is this kind of language. In a pro-drop language like Vietnamese, the same question as in (9) is given in (12).

- (12) Anh để cuốn sách ấy ở đâu?
 he lay volume book that be-at where
 Where did he lay that book?

The answer may be as in (13)

- (13) Anh để ___ trên bàn.
 he lay top-side table
 He laid (it) on the table.

In this mini-discourse there are no other possible referents, so the object pronoun may be dropped. Another way of putting it is that we have an empty pronoun or anaphor.

In Norwegian as in English you cannot drop pronouns in this way, in spite of the fact that they often do not convey any new semantic information. This is because there is a syntactical constraint in these languages that the predicate's arguments must usually be linguistically expressed for a sentence to be grammatically acceptable. But also in the case of a sentence with an overt pronoun as in (10), you have to have access to the context or the universe of discourse in order to interpret the sentence. You have to be able to identify the referent of *it*. So whether there is an overt pronoun or an empty pronoun, interpretation requires identifying the correct previously established discourse referent.

The interpretation of time in (1) is derived from the time adverbial. The antecedent is a linguistic unit from which another unit derives its interpretation or anaphoric reference.

- (1) Yesterday, I came to Jyväskylä.

In the Vietnamese sentences (14 and 15) there is nothing except the time adverbial that expresses time. The verbs themselves are tenseless.

- (14) Hôm qua tôi về.
 yesterday I come back
 I came back yesterday
- (15) Ngày mai tôi về.
 tomorrow I come back
 I'll come back tomorrow

The information you need to interpret the utterances is not in the verbal morphology. There is no verbal morphology at all in Vietnamese.

I have tried to show that there are parallels in the way that pronouns and past tense morphemes behave. I have also tried to demonstrate that some languages, like Vietnamese, both have empty pronouns and lack tense morphemes. But the way in which DRT models discourse highlights the similarity of these anaphoric systems. The information encoded in overt anaphoric elements like pronouns and tense morphemes is often redundant. DRT shows us how other information available from the discourse itself aids us in identifying referents correctly.

What does this have to do then with second language learning/development? One of my basic assumptions is that second language structures develop in ways guided by the needs of communication. In the early stages of second language development it has a very rudimentary grammati-

cal system but still it is used for communication. When a second language speaker uses such a language, what is his most urgent concern? It is to get his message across to the hearer. As far as pronouns are concerned, examples from Vietnamese show that you do not have to use an overt pronoun if its referent is clear from the context (Rosén 1991). For a language learner it would be a reasonable question to ask: Why bother with the pronoun? It often does not provide any new information. Drawing the parallel between pronouns and tense morphemes, the learner might also ask: Why bother with tense? And for a Vietnamese learner it is probably an even more plausible question to ask than for a learner with a mother tongue that has tense. A question for a researcher to ask is then: Is the fact that the Norwegian tense system has such a low functional load one possible explanation for the late tense system or lack of tense system in the second language of Vietnamese learners?

It has been claimed both for first language acquisition and second language acquisition that the grammatical marking of aspect is acquired before tense. If we can argue for grammatical aspect in Norwegian, this appears to be the case in my data.

In Norwegian it is common to treat the perfect as a past time category, at least as one of the categories of the verbal inflection system. But this is only partly correct. Vannebo (1979: 196) argues that the problem of giving a general characterization of the meaning of the perfect is connected with its ambiguous nature; it provides both information of the aktionsart of an event and information of the time of an event. The discussion of whether the perfect should be considered to be primarily a tense category or primarily an aspect category illustrates this ambiguity. There is one important difference between the past tense category and the perfect, namely that the past tense needs access to a past time interval or a past point in time to be interpreted, as shown in (16).

(16) I went to Norway (in 1970).

This is exactly what the anaphoric function of tense illustrates. The perfect on the other hand does not have this anaphoric function in Norwegian, as illustrated in (17).

(17) I have been in Norway (*in 1970).

The utterance in (16) needs reference to a specific point in time to be interpreted while the utterance in (17) does not. I think this is so because perfect is not really a past time category, but rather a present time category. Comrie (1976: 52) can be interpreted to support this assumption "*More generally, the perfect indicates the continuing present relevance of a past situation.*" In Sandström (1993) Moens' analysis of the perfect is presented as a consequent state "*..that is, as referring to the way the world is as a result of the culmination of the event de-*

scribed by the past participle". Moens argues that the perfect has an aspect-changing function.

So what about Vietnamese then? When discussing temporality in Vietnamese, Thompson speaks about tense markers (Thompson 1965: 209). He claims that there are two of them, one for past and one for future. The term tense marker is however somewhat misleading. A closer inspection of the ways in which these markers are used suggests that they have to do with aspect rather than tense. It seems that Thompson's so-called past tense marker has as its main function to indicate anteriority. This function is parallel to the function of the perfect or pluperfect in Norwegian and it can be exemplified by the sentence in (18).

- (18) Lúc tôi 7 tuổi thì tôi đã học đọc rồi.
 time I 7 year then I anterior learn read already
 When I was 7 years old I had already learned to read.

As I already have stated there are several hypotheses that have been put forth to explain how tense systems are acquired in second language. I have suggested still another one, and I am sure there are more to come.

What I started out with was a contrastive perspective. But by using DRT for the contrastive analysis, I have not only described the formal differences, but also discovered the similarity between the languages in question.

I have argued that there is a parallel in the way in which pronouns and tense morphemes behave; this has to do with their anaphoric function. In Norwegian it is not possible to have empty anaphors, neither as pronouns nor as tense morphemes. In Vietnamese, on the other hand, empty anaphors of both kinds are very frequent.

I have also argued that the perfect in Norwegian may be looked upon as an aspectual category and that the so-called past tense markers in Vietnamese mark anteriority and function in a way similar to the perfect in Norwegian.

The difference between tense and aspect as we find it in Norwegian can therefore partly be described by the distinction between anaphoric and non-anaphoric function. The anaphoric function refers to some time established already in the actual universe of discourse. The non-anaphoric function puts new information into the discourse, and that is why it is urgent to express. And perhaps that is why aspect appears before tense in some second languages.

The anaphoric function of tense is therefore a possible candidate for explaining why tense systems are generally acquired later than aspect systems. Since tense morphemes have a low functional load, one may say as Sato does that there is no communicative pressure on the learner to express tense. One of Sato's hypothesis claims that the late tense system of the Vietnamese learners of English is caused by the fact that Vietnamese does not have consonant clusters in syllable final position (Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language). Against this I have argued that Norwegian past tense forms of

verbs do not have final consonant clusters, yet still it is difficult for Vietnamese learners of Norwegian to use the past tense form of the verb correctly. What is even more interesting is the tendency for the perfect form of the verb to be acquired earlier than the past, and perfect participles frequently have final consonant clusters.

But what about my contrastive explanation of the late tense system of the Vietnamese learners? My hypothesis as originally put forth was that since Vietnamese does not have tense as a grammatical category, Vietnamese learners will acquire tense later than learners with a mother tongue which has tense. I still maintain this hypothesis, and taking the theory of tense morphemes as anaphoric expressions into consideration, I think my original hypothesis is even more plausible; there are two sources from which the learner may get support for not marking past tense. One is the universality of the anaphoric function, and the other is the language-specific condition that the mother tongue does not have to linguistically express anaphoric function.

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