

The Interaction of Lexical and Grammatical Aspects in English as a Foreign Language for Iranian Farsi Speaking Learners

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Abstract This study aims to investigate the claims of Aspect Hypothesis which holds that in the past tense, perfective verbs precede imperfective verbs, having a different pattern of acquisition based on their lexical aspect, i.e., learners initiate using perfective past marks from the prototypical verbs which contain the achievement and accomplishment lexical aspects, while they start using imperfective past marks from the verbs whose lexical aspects are stative and activity. In this study, ten Iranian (from Mashhad) Farsi speaking learners of English were given a film to watch and retell the story in impersonal narrative in past tense. The verbs which they applied were classified into 4 lexical aspect categories with different semantic features like telicity, durativity, and dynamicity; these categories include: state, achievement, accomplishment and activity. The results suggest that atelic verbs like state and activity verbs were easier for the students to produce in past perfect and the atelic durative verbs-activities- were produced with higher accuracy in past imperfective.

Keywords: Aspect Hypothesis, grammatical aspect, lexical aspect, perfective past tense, imperfective past tense.

1. Introduction

The sequence of tense-aspect morphology in acquisition has been claimed to follow a universal pattern in both first and second language acquisition which still needs testing against non-Indo European languages (Shirai & Kurono, 1998). Studies in Aspect Hypothesis (AH) have been carried out in acquisition of both first and second languages (e.g., Mishina-Mori, 2000; Wagner, 2001; Shirai & Kurono, 1998).

AH states four claims as follows:

1. Learners start using perfective past marks from achievements and accomplishments and then extend it to activities and statives.
2. Imperfective past precedes perfective past in the languages which encode this distinction, and it begins with stative form of verbs extending to activities, accomplishments and achievements respectively.
3. In languages encoding progressive aspect, progressive marking follows this pattern: activities, accomplishments, and achievements.
4. There is no wrong overextension of progressive markings to statives (Haznedar, 2007; Gabriele, Martohardjono, & McClure, 2005; Shirai, 1991, cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2002).

These claims are rooted in prototype theory (Rosch, 1973 cited in Gabriele, Martohardjono, & McClure, 2005). Based on this theory, children and second language learners acquire language by starting with prototype of each category which share several characteristics with other members of that category (Gabriele, Martohardjono, & McClure, 2005). Most theories of tense and aspect introduce two sorts of aspect: lexical and grammatical (Li, 2000). As Johnson and Fay (2006) said several studies have shown a co-occurrence between lexical and grammatical aspects (e.g. Li & Shirai, 2000).

The aim of the present study is to analyze the verbs Farsi speaking learners used in their film retelling to examine the relationship between lexical and grammatical aspects of the verb morphology performed by

them to see whether lexical aspect influences accuracy with which learners produce grammatical morphology. In other words, the aim of the present study is to investigate the type of verbs which are more prototypical for the Farsi speaking learners of English.

2. Theoretical Background

In the following paragraphs, we will review the notions related to AH and the interaction between lexical and grammatical aspects. This review contains the claims and the predictions of this hypothesis and the definitions given for each aspect in addition to the results of some previous studies.

One of the aspects mentioned in AH is grammatical aspect which refers to especial viewpoints of particular situations (Li, 2000). It is "a system for classifying utterances according to the perspective or viewpoint that convey to the listener" (Comrie, 1976 & Smith, 1997, cited in Johnson & Fey, 2006, p.421). Therefore, whether a sentence presents an ongoing or completed action is a matter of grammatical aspect (Li, 2000). In English, bounded or perfective aspect focuses on the activity from outside which has a beginning and an ending, while unbounded or imperfective aspect looks at the event from the inside with no specific beginning or ending which is encoded with 'be' as the auxiliary verb and -ing which follows the main verb. In English, perfective is unmarked or prototypical. 'She was eating an apple' and 'She ate an apple' can show the imperfective and the perfective respectively (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Johnson & Fey, 2006; Potowski, 2005; Wagner, 2001).

Among the studies in the realm of AH, Brown (1973) is one of the pioneers that scrutinized English as children's first language (Haznedar, 2007). He perceived that progressive aspect marker *-ing-* was the first morpheme appeared in children's language, in addition, they started past perfect verbs with punctual [-durative] verbs such as *fell*. In 1980s and 1990s, the relation between lexical and grammatical aspect of second language went under research as well. In one of these studies, Andersen (1991) construed past perfect as the forerunner (Haznedar, 2007).

Gabriele, Martohardjono, and McClure (2005) also carried out research on Japanese learners of English and found out that even advanced students had difficulty interpreting the past imperfective but they had a little difficulty with the past perfect. Apart from the verb type, past progressive verbs seemed to be more difficult for the learners.

The other sort of aspect is lexical aspect which concerns the inherent meaning of verbs (Li, 2000). It is "a system for classifying utterances into categories based on temporal properties of situations referred to by lexical items in sentences" (Johnson & Fey, 2006, p.420). These properties are shown in Table 1 which as Li (2000) said has originally been taken from the best known system- Vendler's (1967) model. This model was first used in 1989 and since then has been adopted by many L2 researchers (Rohd, 1996). In this model the temporal features are described as it follows: a situation which is dynamic is described by [+dynamic], but a static situation which is not dynamic is shown by [-dynamic]. [\pm telic] shows whether the situation ends to a change of location or state, and [\pm durative] reveals whether or not a situation takes times and energy to happen (Haznedar, 2007; Rohde, 1996; Smith, 1997, cited in Johnson & Fay, 2006).

Table 1. Lexical Aspect Categories

Category	Features
State	[-dynamic][-telic][-durative]
Activity	[+dynamic][-telic][+durative]
Accomplishment	[+dynamic][+telic][+durative]
Achievement	[+dynamic][+telic][durative]

These lexical categories can be defined as follows:

1. Achievement: happens suddenly and can be reduced to a single moment (e.g., die)
2. Accomplishment: has duration and an endpoint (e.g., build a house)
3. Activity: has duration but no endpoint (e.g., walk)
4. State: is not dynamic and does not need additional energy to carry on (e.g., want)

(Li, 2000; Haznedar, 2007; Shirai & Kurono, 1998).

Andersen and Shirai (1994, 1996) stated that learning tense-aspect morphology initiates with the prototype, i.e., with achievements (telic) for perfective, and activities (atelic) for imperfective. Shirai and Kurono (1998) performed two experiments to detect the tense-aspect morphology in learners of Japanese as their second language (JSL). In their first experiment, they used "conversational data" to see the relation between lexical and grammatical aspect and in the second experiment, they carried out research to examine the learners' development of knowledge in Japanese markers via an "acceptability judgment test" (p.250). In their first experiment, the non-natives (NNs) proved a consistent result with AH, since AH predicts "learners are least likely to inflect states for past" (p.260). Their results revealed that 33% of the verbs uttered by natives (Ns) were states while only 10% of the NNs' verbs included state verbs. For achievement verbs the percentages are 54% and 78% for Ns and NNs respectively, and for durative imperfective, 37% and 55% of the verbs were included in durative imperfective category by Ns and NNs respectively. In fact, the learners' verbal morphology was restricted to AH prediction, i.e., they used more achievements in their past marks and more activity verbs in their imperfective marks. In this experiment, it was proved that JSL learners followed AH. It means they used *ta* which is the achievement mark to use past and *-ta i-* which is the activity mark to use imperfective. In this research, NNs used more activity verbs in progressive, while Ns used more achievements. It may mean prototype could be influenced by L1, instruction, or by sequence of teaching. Therefore, sometimes AH might be rejected as it was in Rohde's (1996) research which resulted in correlation of progressive verbs with achievements, not activity verbs. This could be an evidence to reject AH as a universal pattern (Shirai & Kurono, 1998). Also Mishina-Mori (2000) who devoted his study to reviewing some studies such as Rispoli (1981) reported that his findings do not support AH in past imperfective marks.

Wagner (2001) conducted two experiments on children acquisition and she also found little support for AH in first language. She concluded that when the past events are not complete, children do not understand them well.

To justify the rejection of AH, Gabriele, Martohardjono, and McClure (2005) demanded more studies to be done on the acquisition of aspect.

However, they themselves did not prove the transfer of L1. Shirai (2007) referred to Lardiere (2003) and stated that there are some differences between learners' and natives' speech, and AH lack enough attention to L1. In fact, when a learner produces a verb like "walk", it is not obvious whether he has the same semantic feature in his mind as the native speaker. Generally, second language learners bring a fully developed set of 'features' for organizing tense and/or aspect" (p.58).

Moreover, in a study by Johnson and Fey (2006) which adopted the imitation method, the activity verbs were not proved to be produced more accurate in past imperfective, but it was constant with the other studies which state accomplishment or achievement verbs are produced more accurate than activity verbs in past perfect.

Sugaya and Shirai (2007) investigated the effect of L1 on learning the imperfective aspects of Japanese. They employed two methods: acceptability judgment and oral picture description. In the first method, imperfective markers of Japanese reveal a strong association with activity verbs for lower proficiency learners. However, the second method did not support the AH, and it might show the role of L1. Chen and Shirai (2010) also found a deviation from AH in their study which revealed the early use of statives with perfective marker.

3. Purpose of the Present Study

The present study aims to detect the relation between lexical and grammatical aspects in English learning by adult Iranian Farsi speaking learners. In order to achieve this goal, the current study addresses the following questions:

Q1. Do Farsi speaking English learners perform past perfective more correctly than past imperfective?

Q2. Do Farsi speaking English learners use past perfective marking on achievements and accomplishments, which are telic, more correctly than activities and statives, which are atelic?

Q3. Do Farsi speaking English learners use past imperfective marking on statives and activities, which are atelic, more correctly than accomplishment and achievements, which are telic?

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

A total of 10 Iranian adult English learners (female=5, male=5) participated in this study, all studying at university. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 26 who were living in Mashhad, a city in Iran. The main criterion for participation was that all the students had been placed at the first level of Panel Discussion in a language college-*Azaran College*. This level was selected since the students at this level are expected to have basic information about the English grammar, particularly past perfect and imperfect. The learners who participated in this study were volunteers. It means the researchers- with the help of teachers- announced that this activity would bring extra scores for their final exam, and in this way encouraged the students to collaborate.

4.2 Instrumentation

To record the data, an audio tape recorder was used in a class where only one of the researchers and one of the participants were present. The CDs of the cartoon *Shrek III* had already been given to the volunteer students, so that they could watch it at home. This cartoon was selected because when the researchers came out with the idea of this study, it had not been widely available yet and many students like the ones in our study had not seen it.

Therefore, the participants had no idea about the plots and theme before they saw it. In fact, if they had seen it, they might have avoided seeing it again and the factor of forgetting the plot might have affected the way they retold the story.

A list of questions for detecting the inherent aspect was adopted and modified from Chen and Shirai (2010) and Shirai and kurono (1998) which were used for L1 Mandarin Chinese and L2 Japanese respectively. They are composed of a few questions to identify the inherent lexical aspect. The modified version of the test is in Appendix.

In SLA, narrative frame is the most widely used type of texts in the studies of tense-aspect hypothesis (Bardovi-Harlig, 2002). Two types of narration, personal and impersonal narrations exhibit more depth of background and foreground respectively; in other words, they elicit more imperfective and perfective tenses respectively (Comajoan, 2001 cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2002). The narrative frame selected for this study is the personal one which is believed to show higher rates of use of verbal morphology in comparison with impersonal one. This claim has been proved in different studies for different languages like Comajoan (2001) for Catalan language (Bardovi-Harlig, 2002). Another reason to select narrative type is that as mentioned earlier AH claimed that imperfective past appears later than perfective past, that is, it must be more difficult for the learners and according to Gabriele, Martohardjono, and McClure (2005) past imperfective is more difficult for the learners to produce, and since personal narration which contains more background clauses,

can elicit more imperfective verbs, the researchers decided to provide the learners with a situation in which producing imperfective past is facilitated.

4.3 Design and Procedure

The process of data collection started in November (2009) and continued until February (2010). All the participants were given the cartoon Shrek III to watch at home. The Panel Discussion classes were held twice a week, so each session, one of the researchers went to the language college and recorded one of the students' story telling for the maximum of 15 minutes, either before or after the class started, in an empty class with the presence of one of the volunteer learners. According to Bardovi-Harlig (2002) the students took the role of a protagonist who was Shrek in this story. So students put themselves in his shoes and told the story in the first person perspective in past tense. Bardovi-Harlig (2002) also believed that description is another way of eliciting the background; therefore, at the beginning or the end of their retelling, the students described three characters of the story as well.

For the purpose of analyzing the data, the researchers transcribed all the stories which had been retold by the students. Then, the verbs were underlined and classified into past perfective and past imperfective. After that each verb in past perfective and past imperfective were grouped under the four semantic categories (state, activity, accomplishment and achievement). Chi-square was run to compare the verb morphology uttered by the learners in both perfective and imperfective marks.

5. Results

Table 2. The results of Chi-square for the verbs produced by learners in perfective

	Observed N	Expected N	df	÷2	Sig.
State	334	202.5	3	216.07	.000
Activity	251	202.5	3		
Accomplishment	49	202.5	3		
Achievement	176	202.5	3		
Total	810				

As it is illustrated in Table 2, there is a significant difference between activity, accomplishment and achievement verbs in perfective ($\chi^2=216.07$, $p<.05$, $p<.01$). Statives (N=334) and activities (N=251) are more often than expected (202.5). This implies that students use state and activity verbs in past perfect more than achievement and accomplishment. The most frequent verb used in stative form was the forms of *be* and the most frequent activity verb was *came*.
state>activity>achievement/accomplishment

Table 3. The results of Chi-square for the verbs produced by learners in imperfective

	Observed N	Expected N	df	÷2	Sig.
State	24	24.66	3	69.72	.000
Activity	50	24.66	3		
Accomplishment	0	24.66	3		
Achievement	3	24.66	3		
Total	77				

Table 3 reports the results of the Chi-square for the different categories of verbs in past imperfect ($\chi^2=69.72$, $p<.05$, $p<.01$). As it can be seen in this table, there is a significant difference between them. Activity verbs (N=50) was the only category appeared more than expected (N=24.66). This implies that students could perform imperfective marks with activity verbs. But the other categories especially accomplishments revealed weakness in performance. The most frequent activity verb in past imperfective was *be+going*.
activity>state/achievement/accomplishment

6. Discussion

The goal put forward by this study was to examine the relation between lexical and grammatical morphology in English past tense used by adult Iranian learners in order to perceive which classes of verbs and which semantic features are used more frequently in their story telling. In other words, this study aimed to find the prototypical verbs in Iranian Farsi speaking English learners' use of perfective and imperfective past tense which were elicited in a personal film narration.

With regard to the results of this study and since our first question can be answered in affirmative, agreeing with the outcomes in other studies (e.g., Gabriele, Martohardjono, & McClure, 2005), we may conclude the learners produced past perfective more correctly than past imperfective. This can be in line with the idea of Universal Grammar (UG) that most learners such as the ones in our study or those in Andersen's (1991, cited in Haznedar, 2007) or in Gabriele, Martohardjono, and McClure's (2005) tend to use past perfective more easily than past imperfective. L1 can be an effective factor as well, as Shirai and Kurono (1998) revealed dissimilarity between natives and non-natives in using lexical aspects. However, such a claim demands another study on Farsi acquisition of verbs to discover if Farsi, as the first language, follows the same or a different pattern; if it follows the same pattern, the idea of L1 transfer can be taken into account.

As regards the second question, we can come up with the conclusion that Farsi speaking English learners use past perfective marking on states which is in line with Chen and Shirai's (2010) findings; and activities, which are atelic, are used more than accomplishments and achievements. Therefore telicity can be the stipulating factor to predict which category of verbs is produced frequently. This finding can be diverging from AH's prediction and some studies such as that of Johnson and Fay (2006) which concluded higher accuracy of producing accomplishments than producing activities, or from that of Li (2000) that found association between perfective verbs and telic verbs. Again, we might construe it as the role of L1 in tense-aspect morphology, in other words as Shirai and Kurono (1998) stated it reveals that the AH may not be universal and factors such as L1 and teaching materials might be influential.

The results agreeing with Rohd (2000) also suggest that Farsi speaking English learners use past imperfective marking with higher accuracy on activities [-telic]. However, in this study there is no significant difference among the other categories.

To sum up, the results of this study, constant with some other studies such as Chen and Shirai (2010), which worked on children, proved a deviation from AH's prediction, since they also proved more accurate use of statives with past markers. The results seem to imply that telicity could be considered a feature which can facilitate generating past perfective and imperfective verbs. But it seems in past imperfective verbs between two atelic categories, state and activity, the one which is also durative- activity- is better performed.

Therefore, teachers are expected start teaching imperfective past with activity verbs which are atelic and durative and had better put off teaching accomplishments in this tense. But since accomplishments are a part of language, they cannot be ignored entirely. Hence, teachers at upper levels should exclusively concentrate on them because at these levels students are expected to be good enough at other categories and they are ready to be exposed to more difficult ones. In most English course books such as Interchange and American English File, the order for teaching verbs in past tense is based on their regularity; it means the verbs with regular forms of past tense are presented earlier. It could be useful and acceptable, but it would be better if

the matter of telicity and other semantic features were considered as well. For instance, it could be better if the verbs like *be* or *believe*, which are statives, and verbs like 'play' and 'use the computer', which are activities, are presented earlier in past perfective and imperfective respectively, whereas verbs such as 'build', which is accomplishment, should be presented later in both past perfective and imperfective.

This study was carried out on the oral proficiency of some Iranian learners. The same study could be done on the writing skill to detect the different categories of verbs used in writing. The comparison can also be done to see whether there is any difference between oral and written use of verbs. Different levels can be considered in such a study as well. That is, it is a good idea to investigate the impact of different levels of proficiency on using different categories of verbs. In addition, such a study can set out to examine the AH in learning Farsi language as the first language of Iranian children in order to see the differences between the acquisition of different aspects in L1 and L2.

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Appendix

Tests for Inherent Aspects

Step 1. State or Non-State?

-Can it refer to present state in simple present without a habitual present interpretation?

If yes → State (e.g., I love you)

If no → Non-state (e.g., I eat rice every day)

If Non-state, go to the next step.

Step 2. Activity or Non-Activity?

-If you stop in the middle of the action, does that entail that you did the action?

If yes → Activity (e.g., run)

If no → Non-activity (e.g., run a race)

-Can you say "X will VP for Y time" (e.g., 10 min)?

If yes → Activity (e.g., He coughed for 10 minutes)

If no → Non-activity

If Non-activity, go to the next step.

Step 3. Accomplishment or Achievement?

-Can you say X started V but did not complete it?

If yes → Accomplishment (e.g., He almost ran to the school)

If no → Achievement (e.g., He noticed the picture)