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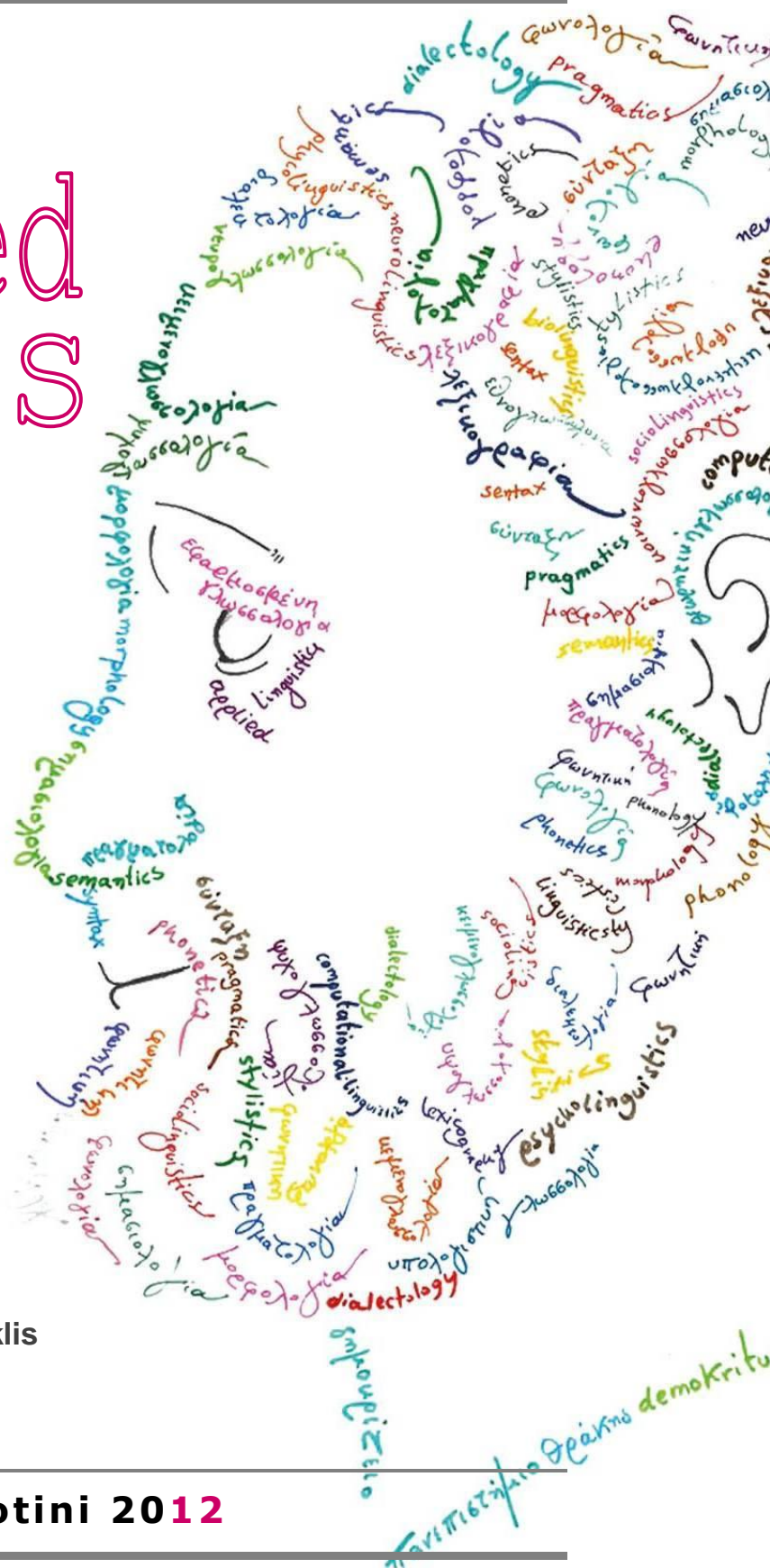
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THE TEMPORAL STRUCTURE OF NARRATIVES IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF GREEK

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the development of narrative skills in the acquisition of Greek as a second language. It investigates the means for expressing two types of temporal relations, sequence and simultaneity. Beginning, intermediate and advanced Albanian learners of L2 Greek were asked to tell a story based on a silent animated film. The analysis revealed that marking of temporal sequence appeared earlier than marking of simultaneity. Beginners relied upon lexical aspect to advance narrative time, at least when their vocabulary allowed them to, while intermediate learners mainly used past perfective verb forms and temporal adverbs. Advanced learners made use of the lexical aspect of eventualities as well as of inflectional morphology. Simultaneity was marked by employing a variety of means, but often ineffectively at both the beginning and the intermediate level.

Keywords: second language acquisition, narrative, temporality

1. Introduction

The expression of temporality by adult second language (L2) learners has attracted a lot of attention in the literature. The relevant research has largely focused on the emergence of verbal morphology of tense and aspect and on factors determining their acquisition (Bardovi-Harlig 2000, Salaberry and Shirai 2002). However, since the '80s a methodological starting point for research has not been morphology, but a conceptual domain like space or time. Within this “function to form” approach, researchers try to identify which sub-components of such domains are expressed at each stage of language acquisition and by what means (von Stutterheim and Klein 1987, Bardovi-Harlig 2000, Starren 2001). This approach has made it possible to gain some insight into the structure of learners' language systems even before the emergence of morphology. Moreover, it turned researchers' attention toward discourse, since principles of discourse organization carry a significant part of temporal information (Klein, Dietrich and Noyau 1993).

Previous research has shown that even learners at a beginning level are able to express temporal information. More specifically, before the emergence of morphology, speakers rely on lexical means (adverbs, noun phrases) and the cooperation of their interlocutor to temporally locate an event as well and on discourse principles to express basic temporal relations between events (Klein and Perdue 1997). Gradually morphology emerges and learners' linguistic repertoire is enriched. Since research on the development of temporality has mainly focused on early and quite advanced levels of L2 acquisition, little is known about temporal organization of texts at intermediate level. Moreover, not much research has been conducted on the temporal organization in L2 Greek at various levels of proficiency.

In this context, this study focuses on the expression of temporal relations in discourse, more particularly oral narrative texts at three levels of L2 competence in Greek: beginning, intermediate and advanced. We focus upon two types of relations between events: sequence, which is the basic temporal relation in narratives, and simultaneity. The more specific questions we raise are:

- At which level of L2 competence are these two temporal relations expressed?
- What are the means used for this purpose?

A narrative, according to some scholars, comprises two information levels, the foreground and the background. There is, however, no consensus on the characteristics attributed to each of them (Hopper 1979, Hopper and Thomson 1980, Reinhart 1984). We here follow Klein and von Stutterheim (1989), who argue that all texts are organized around a central question, which in the case of narratives is

“what happened next?”. Utterances responding directly to this question form the foreground. Utterances answering secondary questions, for example “how did the protagonist feel?”, form the background.

In Klein and von Stutterheim's framework (1989), foregrounded utterances have two basic characteristics. First, they denote eventualities¹ with a time boundary and they entail a change of state. Second, they promote narrative time. More specifically, the reference time of the first event is introduced by an adverb or follows from the situational context. Subsequent utterances are anchored to that event in a relation of temporal sequence (Klein 1995). This is what Klein and von Stutterheim call “the principle of natural order”, according to which the order of events in discourse reflects the order they actually happened. Thus, narrated events are not individually anchored to the *here and now* of the speaker, but one is anchored to the other, forming a referential chain. Speakers are free to anchor their narratives in present, past or even future tense or shift between tenses. However, the anchor tense changes the mental vantage point from where the narrator chooses to “watch” the narrated events, with past being the neutral viewpoint while present or future suggests a more subjective evaluation of events (Tzevelekou and Kantzou 2011). As for tense shifts, Schiffirin (1981) and Wolfson (1982) argue that they are not incidental, but are used to mark discourse units. Moreover, shifts to the so-called “historical present” highlight escalation points of the story.

In Greek the time boundary necessary for advancing narrative time is expressed through perfective aspect, whenever past tense is used. In case the narrative or a passage is anchored to the present tense, time is promoted through lexical aspect, as the perfective/imperfective opposition is unavailable in this tense. More specifically, the inherent completion point of accomplishments and achievements is taken as an anchor point for the next event (Tzevelekou, in print). Moreover, aspectual verbs focus on the beginning or end of an activity. Adverbials of temporal sequence are also used to mark sequence of events. Breaking the principal of natural order in cases of eventualities with inherent completion points requires marking of the temporal relation, through temporal clauses for example.

2. Method

Narratives were elicited from three groups of L2 learners of Greek: beginner ($n=9$), intermediate ($n=15$) and advanced ($n=15$). All learners had Albanian as their L1. The elicitation material was a silent animated film, which describes the adventures of a boy and his dog during a winter day. Narratives were transcribed and divided into propositions, which were further categorized as foreground or background. Foregrounded propositions were coded for lexical aspect, tense, aspectual verbs and adverbs of temporal sequence. Temporal sequence was studied for all foregrounded events in each narrative. Simultaneity, on the other hand, was studied in relation to specific overlapping events of the film (Picture 1). For those learners that made an effort to denote this temporal relation, the means used were coded (e.g. temporal clauses, aspect, adverbials).



Picture 1 Screenshots from the overlapping events of the film

The proficiency level of the L2 learners was determined on the basis of criteria proposed by Varlokosta and Triandafyllidou (2003). These criteria are presented in Table 1².

¹ Following Bach (1981), the word “eventualities” is used as a general term to refer to all types of lexical aspect.

² The proficiency level was determined on the basis of a speech sample larger than the narrative studied here (for details, see Kantzou 2010).

	NOUN PHRASE	VERB PHRASE	CLAUSES
BEGINNING	❖ Lack of genitive morphological marking	❖ Perfective non-past forms in main clauses (subjunctive) ❖ Lack of Past Imperfective	❖ Lack of indirect speech
INTERMEDIATE	❖ Genitive in singular number (occasional production of plural genitive)	❖ Past Imperfective ❖ Present Perfect ❖ Occasional production of Past Perfect	❖ Lack of indirect speech
ADVANCED	❖ Genitive in both singular and plural	❖ Stabilization of Past Perfect ❖ Functional differentiation of verb stems (perfective – imperfective)	❖ Indirect speech ❖ Reason clauses introduced by <i>αφού</i> ('after') ❖ Concessive clauses

Table 1 Criteria for defining L2 proficiency level

3. Results

Table 2 presents the number of propositions and the percentage of foregrounded and backgrounded ones in each group of learners. Beginners produced short narratives, with a statistically significant increase at the intermediate level (Mann-Whitney U test, $p\text{-value}=0,015<0,05$), but not at the advanced level, although a rise in total number of propositions was observed (Mann-Whitney U test, $p\text{-value}=0,539 > 0,05$). The percentage of foregrounded propositions in all groups was higher than that of backgrounded ones.

	Total number of propositions	Foreground	Background
Beginning	222	52,70%	46,85%
Intermediate	768	55,60%	44,40%
Advanced	854	57,85%	42,15%

Table 2 Total number of propositions and percentages of foreground and background propositions

Figure 1 shows the use of tenses in the foregrounded propositions, regardless of the inherent temporal properties of eventualities. Beginners equally used past and non past forms. They also produced a large number of non-past perfective verb forms, imperatives, past participles and other forms that are considered infelicitous choices. Intermediate learners on the other hand came to restrict themselves mainly to past tense. At the same time, present tense and infelicitous verbal choices were reduced. At the advanced level present tense propositions tripled in frequency. However, statistical analysis of these results revealed a significant difference between past and non-past forms only within the intermediate group (Wilcoxon test, $Z=-2,175$, $p\text{-value}=0,030 < 0,05$), but no difference within the advanced group ($Z=-1,264$, $p\text{-value}=0,206 > 0,05$).

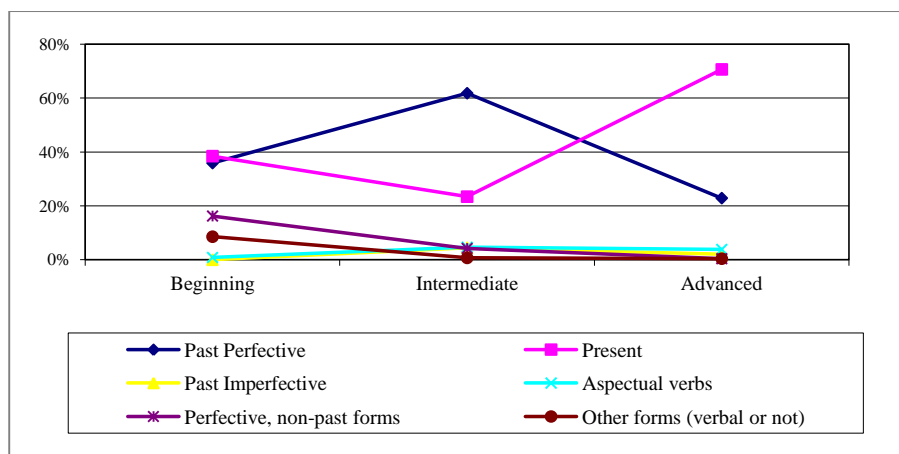


Figure 1 Use of verbal forms in foregrounded propositions

Adverbs of temporal sequence appeared in about 13 and 16% of all propositions in beginning and intermediate learners, but dropped to about 5% at advanced level (Table 3). Statistical analysis confirmed that the group of advanced learners differed significantly from the other two groups (Mann-Whitney U test, Beginning–Intermediate $p\text{-value} = 0,599 > 0,05$, Beginning–Advanced, $p\text{-value} = 0,005 < 0,05$, Intermediate – Advanced $p\text{-value} = 0,002 < 0,05$).

L2 learners	Percentage
Beginning	15,77%
Intermediate	13,28%
Advanced	5,27%

Table 3 Percentage of propositions containing an adverb of temporal sequence

Turning now to each learners' group separately, we will examine in more detail the way they constructed the foreground of their narratives and their attempts to indicate a violation in the "principle of natural order".

3.1 Beginning level

Although it is difficult to claim that there was no functional morphology at the beginning level, it seemed that it was not sufficiently developed to systematically support the advancement of narrative time. As shown in Table 4, beginners did not systematically use perfective aspect (Aorist) in foregrounded propositions. Several verbal forms were used infelicitously (ex. 1–2). Given these difficulties with verbal morphology, other means had to be exploited for temporal relations to be expressed.

	Eventualities <u>with</u> an inherent endpoint	Eventualities <u>without</u> an inherent endpoint
Past Perfective (Aorist)	33,33%	2,57%
Present	27,35%	11,11%
Past Imperfective	0	0
Aspectual verb – Past tense ³	0	0
Aspectual verb – Present tense	0	0,85%
Perfective, non-past forms	15,38%	0,85%
Other forms (verbal or not)	8,56%	

Table 4 Tenses and aspectual verbs in the foregrounded propositions of beginning learners

³ In the case of aspectual verbs, the inherent temporal characteristics refer not to the aspectual verb itself – which is always *telic* – but to the temporal properties of their complements.

- 1) Μετά ο αφεντικό πάει, πίνει ένα τσάι και &εϋκα &εϋκαριστ ευκαριστημένη xx το σκύλος.⁴
Then the [dog's] master goes, drinks a cup of tea and happy [: PASSIVE PARTICIPLE] the dog.
- 2) Το σκύλο πάει [//] πήρε ένα από τα πάτινα και θα βάλει μέσα στο [//] στο πόδι της και φύγει να κάνει πατιναζο σκύλος.
The dog goes [//] took one of the skating shoes and will put [: PERFECTIVE FUTURE] inside her foot and leave [: PERFECTIVE NON-PAST] to skate the dog.

Within the beginning level two phases were identified. In the first phase, learners used very limited grammatical and lexical resources. Narratives were very brief, mainly consisting of backgrounded propositions where high frequency verbs such as *είμαι* ('to be') predominated. The difficulty of constructing chains of sequential events stemmed less from limited morphological and lexical devices denoting time and more from a limited vocabulary for describing the events themselves. In example 3 the proposition *είναι μέσα στο νερό* ('they are in the water') is a state, which takes the place of an event, something like *έπεσε μέσα στα νερό* ('fell in the water'), because the speaker has not yet acquired the verb *πέτω* ('fall') (or it was not available to her at the time of speaking).

- 3) *Είναι ένα παιδί και θέλει να ## ice [% in english] # και η σκύλο θέλει και έρθει [?] και δεν μπορεί γιατί δεν έχει παπούτσι. Ε: μετά ## ε: <ο παι> [/] τα παιδιά είναι στο [/] μέσα στο νερό και η σκύλο θέλει να +... to get out [% in english].*
 There is a boy and he wants to ## ice [% in english] and the dog wants and come and [he] cannot because he doesn't have a shoe. E: then ## e: <the ch> [/] the children are in the water and the dog wants to +... to get out [% in english].

In the more advanced phase of beginners, vocabulary was enriched and more events were included in the narratives. Although there were some verbal morphological contrasts, tense and aspect morphology was not systematically used to mark temporal relations. Sequence was instead mainly expressed through the inherent completion point of events. Learners were thus able to structure simple narratives consisting of foregrounded events and backgrounded states (ex. 4). However, as in the first phase, there were cases indicating that learners still faced difficulties constructing eventualities with appropriate inherent temporal characteristics (see double underlined proposition in ex. 6 below). Especially in the second phase, adverbs of temporal sequence became very important for learners, since they contributed to clarifying temporal relations (Bardovi-Harlig 2000, 39).

- 4) Foreground

[b] και ξυπνήσει το πρωί
and wake up in the morning

[c] και κάνει τη γυμναστική το πρωί.
and exercises in the morning.

Background

[a] τώρα ήταν μια [/] ένας σκυλός
Now there was a dog

[d] Αλλά ήταν [/] το καιρό ήταν κακό,
but the weather was bad

[e] ήταν πολύ κρύο,
it was very cold

[f] <το δρόμος xxx> [/] οι δρόμοι ήταν
παγωμένοι.
the road xxx> [/] the roads were frozen

[g] και αυτό <δεν xxx> [/] δεν μπορεί να
περπατεί.
and he can't walk

[h] &α εεε πάει στο σπίτι στο [/] μμμμ στο αγκόρι
(he) goes to the house to [/] to the boy

[i] και χτυπήσει την πόρτα.
and knock on the door.

⁴ The transcription in the examples has been done in the Greek alphabet, using the symbols proposed in the Childe transcription system (MacWhinney 2012).

[j] *Μετά αυτός πάει έξω*
Then he goes out
[k] *και είδε το δρόμο*
and saw the road

[l] *που &ήτ ήταν παγωμένο.*
that was frozen.

Despite its effectiveness, the beginners' language system was characterized by two significant weaknesses. The first was that lack of systematic aspect marking made it difficult to integrate eventualities without an inherent completion point into the foreground. The second became apparent in cases where learners needed to break the "principle of natural order" to denote temporal relations like simultaneity or anteriority between dynamic events. In fact, none of the first phase beginners marked the case of simultaneity studied here, while two of the second phase made an unsuccessful effort (ex. 4-5).

- 5) *Το αγόρι όταν παίζουν μαζί, το αγόρι έσπασε το πάγο και ε: xx μπει μέσα.*
The boy fall, when [they] play [: PERFECTIVE NON-PAST] together, the boy broke the ice and e: xx fall in.
- 6) *Αλλά μετά το αγόρι πήρες τη πάτινα το σκυλό και συνεχίζει να κάνει μόνο του, αλλά το πάγο δεν ήταν πολύ καλό και το παιδί μπήκε μέσα στο νερό.*
But then the boy took the skating shoe and continues [: PRESENT] to skate alone, but the ice was not very good and the boy went into the water.

3.2 Intermediate level

As mentioned, learners in this group preferred past tense propositions (71.12% of all foregrounded ones), while the present tense was restricted to 24.65% (Table 5). Past and present verb forms were not uniformly distributed among all narratives. The majority of speakers produced past anchored foregrounds. However, three of them anchored their foreground mainly in the present tense (Figure 2).

	Eventualities <u>with</u> an inherent endpoint	Eventualities <u>without</u> an inherent endpoint
Past Perfective	57,61%	4,92%
Present	19,91%	3,51%
Past Imperfective	2,34%	2,11%
Aspectual verb – Past tense	0%	3,98%
Aspectual verb – Present tense	0,47%	0,23%
Perfective, non-past forms	4,22%	0%
Other forms (verbal or not)	0,70%	

Table 5 Tenses and aspectual verbs in the foregrounded propositions of intermediate learners

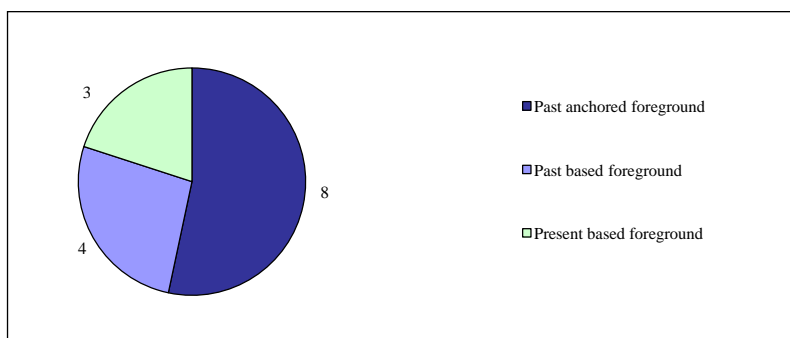


Figure 2 Temporal anchoring of the foreground in the narratives of intermediate learners (n=15)

In the past anchored propositions, temporal sequence was effectively expressed, since the Past Perfective was more systematically used to mark it (ex. 7). In the case of present tense propositions, the inherent completion point of events also advanced narrative time (ex. 8).

- 7) *Μετά ο σκύλο είπε ότι κάνει κρύο και έβαλε τα χέρια του πάνω του και ο άνθρωπος πήγε μέσα και έφερε ρούχα για το σκύλο.*
Then the dog said [: PERFECTIVE PAST] that it was cold and put [: PERFECTIVE PAST] his hands around him and the man went [: PERFECTIVE PAST] inside and brought [: PERFECTIVE PAST] clothes for the dog.
- 8) *Και πάει στην άκρη <της καλ> [//] της σκάλας, βγάζει το κασκόλ του και του το δίνει.*
And [the dog] goes [: PRESENT] to the edge of the ladder, takes off [: PRESENT] his scarf and gives [: PRESENT] it to him.

However, there was evidence in intermediate narratives that learners faced some problems when expressing this temporal relation. Two sources of difficulty were identified. First, verbal morphology of tense and aspect was not fully developed, as the infelicitous uses of the past imperfective and other verb forms indicated in about 9% of all foregrounded propositions (ex. 9-10). Second, learners were not always able to formulate propositions with appropriate to context inherent temporal characteristics. This created vagueness especially in present tense propositions. In example 11 the verb *σκέφτομαι* ('think') seems to stand in the place of a verb with an inherent completion point like *αποφασίζω* ('decide'). The frequent use of aspectual verbs by this group is an indication, in our view, of the effort to integrate eventualities without an inherent completion point into the foreground (ex. 11).

- 9) *και μετά χτύπησε το κουδούνι του αφεντικό και +... [...] και μετά φορούσαν τα ρούχα τους και βγήκανε για βόλτα.*
And then (he) rang its master's doorbell and... and then they were wearing [: PAST IMPERFECTIVE] their clothes and went out for a walk.
- 10) *xx ο άνθρωπος &επε πέφτε κάτω. Μετά ο άνθρωπος πήρε κάτι...*
xx the man fall [: IMPERFECTIVE IMPERATIVE?]. Then the man took something...
- 11) *Ζήτησε βοήθεια από το σκυλάκι, <σκυλάκι εεεε> [/] σκυλάκι εεεε: αρχίζει να γελάει хахаха хахаха xx σκυλάκι, και μετά σκέφτεται, λέω [/] λέω εγώ, να τον βοηθάει, πήρε μια σκάλα...*
He asked the doggy for help, doggy e: [/] doggy e: starts to laugh hahaha hahaha xx doggy, and then [he] thinks, I say, to help him, [he] took a ladder...

As mentioned, intermediate learners made substantial use of adverbs, even though temporal sequence was often simultaneously marked by additional means in the same proposition (e.g. the past perfective) (ex. 12).

- 12) *εε και μετά αυτά που είχε φορέσει ο σκύλος <τα πήρε> [//] τα φόρεσε το αγόρι, και μετά [...] άρχισε αυτό να κάνει σκι . Επίσης εεε μετά νομίζω ότι βούλιαξε ο [//] το αγόρι , βούλιαξε μέσα στο ποτάμι...*
and then the boy took [//] put on those [: the skate shoes] that the dog had put on, and then [...] he started to skate. Moreover, then I think that the boy sank, sank into the river...

One of the major weaknesses of beginners' language system, namely the expression of simultaneity, remained a source of difficulty at the intermediate level. Only half of the learners attempted to mark it, and, in fact, not always successfully, as learners faced difficulties in the lexical encoding of events, the use of Past Imperfective and the lack of specialized temporal conjunctions. In example 13, use of the general conjunction *όταν* ('when') with the light verb *κάνω* ('do'), which does not present an opposition between perfective and imperfective stem, does not make clear whether the activity of skating was completed or not. In example 14, the speaker implicates through the aspectual verb *αρχίζω* ('start') – although not in the appropriate aspect – that the activity of skating may not have been completed (Papafragou 2006), but this implicature is not further developed and the event of the ice breaking is not mentioned.

- 13) *Και μετά γύρισε και μπήκε το παιδί μέσα και όταν [//] όταν έκανε το γύρο του πάγο # ε: άνοιξε [//] με τις παπούτσες άνοιξε μια τρύπα που [//] που μπήκε μέσα.*

And then he [: the dog] returned and the child went on the lake and when he did a round in the lake, he opened a hole with his shoes, into which he fell.

- 14) Μετά ο [//] ο άνθρωπος άρχιζε να κάνει πατινάζ και ο [//] μπήκε μέσα στο νερό γιατί εκεί που πήγε αυτός <ο πάγος δεν ήταν> [//] δεν υπήρχε πολύ πάγο κι αυτός πήγε μέσα στο νερό.

Then the man started [: PAST IMPERFECTIVE] to skate and the [//] went into the water, because where he went <the ice was not> [//] there was not much ice and he went into the water.

3.3 Advanced level

Within the advanced group, individual differences were observed with regard to foreground anchoring (Figure 3). The majority of learners showed a preference for present tense. However, three learners used past tense in the foreground, while two used both present and past tense roughly equally.

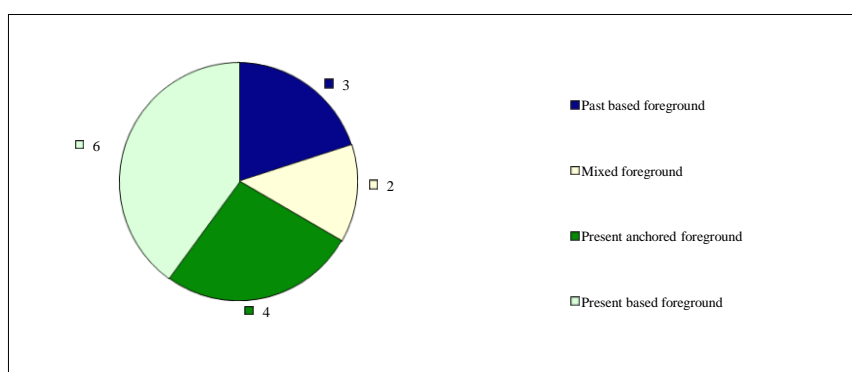


Figure 3 Temporal anchoring of the foreground in the narratives of advanced learners (n=15)

As shown in Table 6, advanced learners effectively moved narrative time forward using either past perfective marking (ex. 15) or the inherent completion point of events in case of present tense anchoring (ex. 16).

	Eventualities <u>with</u> an inherent endpoint	Eventualities <u>without</u> an inherent endpoint
Past Perfective	20,65%	2,23%
Present	63,77%	6,88%
Past Imperfective	0,81%	1,22%
Aspectual verb – Past tense	0,40%	0,40%
Aspectual verb – Present tense	0,61%	2,23%
Perfective, non-past forms	0,40%	0%
Other forms (verbal or not)	0,40%	

Table 6 Tenses and aspectual verbs in the foregrounded propositions of advanced learners

- 15) Πήρε τα πατίνια του το αγοράκι, ντύθηκε και εκείνος ωραία και πήγανε σε μια λιμνούλα που ήταν λίγο πιο πέρα.

The little boy took [: PERFECTIVE PAST] the skating shoes, he also got dressed [: PERFECTIVE PAST] nicely and they went [: PERFECTIVE PAST] to the pond that was just beyond.

- 16) *Μπαίνει μέσα στη λίμνη και ξαφνικά, ενώ χοροπηδούσε εκεί μέσα [...] ο πάγος σπάει και ανοίγεται μια τρύπα, στην οποία πέφτει μέσα το παιδί. Και αρχίζει να φωνάζει τρομαγμένο.*
He goes [: PRESENT] into the lake and suddenly, while jumping in there [...], the ice breaks [: PRESENT] and a hole is opened [: PRESENT], into which the boy falls [: PRESENT]. And [the boy] starts [: PRESENT] to cry terrified.

Vagueness in temporal sequence was reduced to a minimum. Cases of vagueness mainly regarded present tense propositions in which speakers made infelicitous choices of vocabulary. In example 17, the learner uses the verb *περπατάω* ('walk'), resulting thus in an eventuality without an inherent completion point. The use of a verb like *ανεβαίνω* ('climb') would have removed the vagueness.

- 17) *Παίρνει μια σκάλα που ήτανε σ' ένα δένδρο εκεί και το βάζει, περπατάει πάνω στη σκάλα, βγάζει το κασκόλ του ο σκύλος...*
It [: the dog] takes a ladder that was at a tree over there and it places it, walks [: PRESENT] on the ladder, the dog takes off its scarf...

Adverbs of temporal sequence were reduced in comparison with intermediate level learners. Moreover, at this level they were used, not only to express a temporal relation, but they also undertake a discourse function, appearing in places of discontinuities in narrative content, like place or character shifts (ex. 18).

- 18) *Και έκανε πατινάζ ο πρώτος σκύλος και γύρισε πάλι πίσω. Μετά # πήρε το παπούτσι στο σκύλο ο αγοράκι.*
And the first dog skated [: the dog skated first] and came back. Then the boy took the shoe from the dog.

Finally, advanced learners came to mark simultaneity between dynamic eventualities, through various devices: aspectual verbs to implicate that an activity did not end, temporal clauses, imperfective marking and adverbials (see ex. 16 above).

4. Discussion

In summary, temporal sequence between events was marked earlier than simultaneity. Moreover, the particular means used for marking temporal relations differed rather interestingly across the three levels of L2 competence. While beginners relied mainly upon lexical aspect to advance narrative time, at least when their limited vocabulary allowed them to, intermediate learners preferred past perfective verb forms and temporal adverbs. Advanced learners made use of the lexical aspect of eventualities as well as of perfective verbal morphology. However, a breaking in the "principle of natural order", as in the case of simultaneity studied here, could not be expressed at the beginning level and remained a source of difficulty at the intermediate level. Only advanced learners were able to mark this temporal relation, utilizing a variety of means.

What is of particular interest in the described developmental course is the preference for past tense anchoring by intermediate learners. More specifically, beginners frequently shifted between past and non-past verb forms, while the large majority of intermediate learners anchored their narratives in the past with the exception of three speakers. Finally, advanced learners made equal use of past and present tense. The preference of L2 learners for past tense anchoring after the beginning level has been reported in previous studies (Hendriks 1999, Salaberry 2000 and for Greek, Bella 2004-2005). However, this finding is either bypassed (Hendriks 1999) or attributed to the learners perceiving the narration as a classroom task which requires past tense practice (Salaberry 2000). Bella (2004-2005), whose point of interest is indeed the historical present in L2 narratives, suggests that learners who have not been exposed to natural input in the target language do not have the chance to "notice" this function of the present tense and language instruction does not compensate for this fact. To our knowledge, no study has reported the growing preference of advanced learners for present tense anchoring.

We believe that the developmental changes in tense anchoring can be better interpreted if associated with the learners' growing capacities to meet the demands of text production. Oral linguistic communication requires the coordination of different capacities, such as forming grammatical sentences, appropriately linking them, structuring discourse content and adjusting linguistic choices to the communicative situation. At the beginning and intermediate levels, where linguistic performance is

not yet automatised, learners are striving to produce well-structured texts in all of these aspects. However, they cannot attend equally to all these aspects of text production due to cognitive constraints, namely attention limitations (Skehan 1996, Skehan and Foster 1999⁵). It is assumed here that these restrictions direct learners' attention to the construction of sentences or small discourse units, reducing, therefore, attention to the overall hierarchical organization of narrative content as well as to the evaluation of narrated events. As a result, systematic use of the narrative present, as an indicator of a fully developed text macrostructure and an evaluative stylistic shift in narrator's viewpoint, is not expected at lower proficiency levels, but is rather achieved at the advanced level where learners have to some extent automatised language production procedures at a local level.

This explanation may also be pertinent for the relative increased use of adverbs at lower and intermediate levels, even when temporal sequence is marked through other means. These adverbs indicate the learners' need to overmark cohesion at a local level, as a compensation for their inability to attend to the macrostructure of narratives.

It is also worth noting that the methodological approach taken in this study enabled us to detect the growing capacity of learners to construct events with the appropriate to context inherent temporal characteristics. Research on temporal semantics has shown that sentence construction and choice of vocabulary play a crucial role in denoting temporal relations. However, L2 acquisition studies on temporality have mainly focused on whether the type of eventualities determines tense and aspect marking (Bardovi-Harlig 2000, Salaberry and Shirai 2002). In this study we found evidence that constructing the lexical content of sentences has itself a long developmental course in L2 acquisition. Learners' infelicitous choices of vocabulary create vagueness in temporal relations up until the advanced level of proficiency. Thus, it seems that the focused investigation of this parameter of language acquisition is a line of research that can contribute to constructing a more complete picture of how learners express temporal information.

Concluding, adult L2 learners are able to construct the backbone of a narrative even at beginning level, since their cognitive and linguistic/communicative maturity allows them to rely on the inherent temporal properties of eventualities and knowledge about the principles of discourse organisation. However, to unfold all their narrative abilities and to gain control of their text at a global level, they need to develop advanced language skills.

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⁵ Although Skehan and Foster's research concerns learners' performance on tasks in educational practice, we believe that their claims are valid for all communicative tasks in and out of classroom.

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