TOWARD A THEORY OF TENSE-ASPECT IN NARRATIVE DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This paper presents the broad outline of a theory of tense and aspect in narrative texts. The theory is founded on the concept of markedness and rests on two fundamental assumptions: (1) that narrative constitutes a marked category of linguistic performance whose grammar differs in certain respects from that of ordinary interactive discourse; (2) that adult linguistic competence includes, as one of its components, a 'narrative norm', an internalized set of shared conventions and assumptions about what constitutes a well-formed story. The narrative norm is defined in terms of markedness values for a set of properties, operative at different levels of the linguistic system, which collectively define its unmarked tense: the Perfective Past, or Preterit. A major claim this paper makes is that when in a narrative the Present tense - or any tense other than the Preterit - is chosen, the narrator's objective (conscious or unconscious) is to neutralize one or more of the properties that collectively define the Preterit as the unmarked tense of narration, and in turn establish the norms for narrative discourse. To depart from the Preterit is to depart from narration, understood as an activity through which the unordered raw data of experience, real or imagined, are retrospectively converted into language and in the process configured into a meaningful construct: a story. This paper focuses on the crucial role of tense in process of narrativization and in very definition of narrative textuality.

1. Introduction

In recent years a major project of text-oriented linguistics has been an investigation into the linguistic foundations of narrative. The goal of this project is to arrive at an understanding of the strategies used by storytellers to construct verbal icons of experience, both real and imagined. The present paper forms part of this broad based enterprise, and represents one facet of an inquiry I have been engaged in over the past several years into the linguistic structure of narrative, an inquiry focused on the grammatical categories of TENSE and ASPECT. The major findings of this research are elaborated in a book entitled Tense and Narrativity (= Fleishman 1990).

In the book I propose a functional theory of tense-aspect\textsuperscript{1} in narrative discourse. The theory is based on the concept of MARKEDNESS and is designed to account for the variety of functions tense and aspect are called upon to perform in the linguistic economy of a narration, in particular functions other than their basic grammatical functions in ordinary language. A broad outline of this theory
will be presented here, illustrated by examples from narrative fiction in French. The choice of examples from literature should not, however, be interpreted to mean that the theory is restricted to literary or written narration; to the contrary, it applies equally to the natural narrations that punctuate our everyday conversational exchanges. Like most linguists who have ventured into the domain of literary/poetic discourse, I am convinced that insight into the structure and organization of 'artificial' narrative forms must be based on a thorough analysis of the workings of 'natural' narration. If my examples are drawn from literature, this is because the institution of writing and the special pragmatic status of fiction (see Adams 1985) license certain uses of tense-aspect that are not found in natural-language narrations. Artificial narrative forms, and narrative fiction in particular, exploit the resources of tense-aspect systems in particular ways that their natural-language counterparts do not and can thus provide a more compelling illustration of the basic tenets of my theory.

2. An approach to tense in narrative based on markedness

The theory of tense in narrative that I wish to propose is based on the concept of markedness and is founded by two major propositions. The first is that 'narration' constitutes a marked category of linguistic performance whose grammar differs in certain respects from the grammar of ordinary interactive language. This claim is not an original one; it has been advanced by narratologists of various stripes, in particular those concerned with such phenomena as Free Indirect Discourse, the Historical Present, and what narrativist historiographers refer to as 'narrative statements'. These particular phenomena - and there are others one might cite in this connection - occur exclusively in narrative discourse, and provide evidence of its marked status. In the example of Free Indirect Discourse given in (1):

(1) *Now was* his last chance to see her; his plane *left tomorrow*.

we observe past tenses collocating with present and future time adverbs; this is only possible in narrative, and some would argue only in literary fiction. The example of Historical Present given in (2) likewise occurs only in narrative discourse, in this case from a natural narrative elicited recently in San Francisco in response to the question "Where were you during the earthquake?"

(2) *So I'm sitting* in my office when all of a sudden the whole damn building *starts to shake*.

Finally, consider the examples in (3) of the 'narrative statements' that constitute a hallmark of historiographic discourse (examples from Danto 1965):

(3a) Piero da Vinci begat a *universal genius*.
(3b) And so, at Sarajevo, *the first shot of the First World War* was fired.

Clearly, these statements could not have been uttered at the moment of Leonardo's
birth or by an observer who happened to witness the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand on June 28, 1914. As the italicized portions suggest, these statements are informed by a 'retrospective intelligibility' which marks them as linguistic products of a configurational act through which experiential data are organized into narratives. Accordingly, statements of this type are consistently, across languages, reported by a Perfective (PFV) tense of the PAST.

The point of these examples is merely to illustrate the claim that certain kinds of utterances occur only in narrative language and thus provide support for the view that narrative constitutes a marked linguistic context.

The issue of markedness, which has been of concern primarily to linguists oriented toward literature, is not simply a theoretical issue to be debated for its own sake. It is central to the theory I develop to account for tense usage in narrative, a theory based on markedness and specifically on the proposition, originally proposed by Andersen (1972) with respect to phonological oppositions, that in a context that is itself marked, the normal markedness values of an opposition may be reversed. How does this notion apply to tense oppositions?

Most linguists would concur that in languages with a basic PAST/NONPAST opposition, in the unmarked context of ordinary (i.e., nonnarrative) language, the PRESENT is the unmarked tense, with respect to which the PAST is marked. And if we accept the idea that narrative constitutes a marked linguistic context, then according to the markedness-reversal hypothesis we should not be surprised to see an exchange of markedness values within the 'special' tense system of narrative. A major thrust of Tense and Narrativity is to demonstrate the operation of this hypothesis, in particular the proposition that in a narrative context the PRESENT tense - or any tense-aspect category other than the PAST (i.e., the PFV PAST⁴)- is 'marked' with respect to one or more of a set of properties that together define the PAST as the unmarked tense of narration. This hypothesis entails a particular view of the category PAST: as defined by the markedness framework, PAST is no longer construed as a simple unanalyzable piece of grammatical information, but rather as a 'cluster concept' involving multiple oppositional properties operative at different levels of the linguistic system - the REFERENTIAL, the TEXTUAL, the EXPRESSIVE, and the METALINGUISTIC.

3. The locus of tense within a functional model of language

My analysis of tense in narrative rests on a functional model of language according to which utterances can realize meanings in four interdependent components of the linguistic system, here referred to as the REFERENTIAL, the TEXTUAL, the EXPRESSIVE, and the METALINGUISTIC. This model is an adaptation of a three-level model proposed in Traugott (1982), itself a variation on a similar model put forth by Halliday & Hasan (1976). What I have added to their models is the METALINGUISTIC component.⁵

Briefly, the REFERENTIAL component is concerned with the propositional content of utterances, in particular with truth-conditional relations, referential meanings, and grammatical meanings, including the so-called 'basic' meanings or functions of tense and aspect.
The TEXTUAL or DISCOURSE component is the locus of a language's resources for creating and organizing discourse that is internally coherent and coheres with its situation context, and for signaling other information pertinent to the structure and organization of the text itself, such as topic-focus relations or foreground and background.

The EXPRESSIVE component includes linguistic devices relating to the social, affective, and conative functions of language: in particular, its resources for expressing personal attitudes toward what is being talked about, toward the discourse itself, and toward the participants in the speech-situation. The EXPRESSIVE component is the locus of speaker evaluations, whose importance in natural narrative has been brought out by Labov and which has been invoked with regard to tense, specifically tense switching, by Schiffirin (1981), Silva-Corvalán (1983), and in my own 1985 paper on Old French.

Finally, the METALINGUISTIC component houses a language's resources for talking about itself, since is it only through language that we can make statements about language. Included under the metalinguistic rubric are meanings or functions that signal a particular style, register, genre, or type of discourse. The French passé simple, for example, has a METALINGUISTIC function, which some now take to be its primary function, of signaling a particular type of discourse: formal written narration that is detached from its producer and emptied of subjectivity (cf. among many commentators on this category of French grammar, Benveniste 1959, Waugh & Monville Burston 1986). For languages with explicit narrative morphology, at least one function of this morphology is obviously METALINGUISTIC: it identifies a discourse as narrative. Among the various tense functions located in the METALINGUISTIC component, one of the most striking, discussed below, is what I will refer to as the 'anti-narrative' function of the PRESENT tense.

Both Traugott and Halliday & Hasan situate the contribution of tense-aspect to the linguistic message in the REFERENTIAL component. But this assignment accounts only for the primary, or basic meanings of these categories, i.e., for tense as a grammaticalized marker of deictic temporal relations, and aspect as means of profiling situations as to their boundedness or completion. One of the principal claims I wish to make here is that the functions of tense-aspect categories in narrative are not limited to these basic REFERENTIAL meanings; rather, tense and aspect do as much if not more of their work in the two PRAGMATIC components (TEXTUAL and EXPRESSIVE) and in the METALINGUISTIC component; moreover, the functions of tense-aspect that are exclusive to narrative are specifically NON-REFERENTIAL functions.

4. The 'narrative norm'

As stated above, my theory of tense in narrative is founded on two basic premises, the first being the essential markedness of narrative language. The second is the notion that the linguistic competence of normal adults includes, as one of its components, a narrative norm, i.e., an internalized set of shared conventions and assumptions about what constitutes a well-formed story. In the Western narrative tradition (broadly construed), the major tenets of this norm are:
(a) that narratives refer to specific experiences that occurred in some past world (real or imagined), and are accordingly normally reported in tenses of the PAST;

(b) that while narratives contain both sequentially ordered events and non-sequential collateral material (descriptions, narrator commentary), it is the events that constitute the backbone of a narration;

(c) that the unmarked order of presentation in narrative is one in which the order of narrative units (clauses) in a text parallels the order in which events are assumed to have occurred in the world modelled by that text. This default ordering principle is referred to as 'iconic sequence'; and

(d) that all narrations are informed by a particular mode of reporting information, which establishes the narrator's perspective on, relationship to, or involvement with the agents and events of the story. I propose the metaphor of a 'narrating persona' to refer to this relationship, which may change over the course of a narration. In other words, over the course of their narrations, narrators can, and often do, adopt different stances toward their material, or different narrating personae, and these shifts are signalled by changes in the language of the text. In the unmarked instance, the reporting mode is a dispassionate, objective chronicling of events in which the narrator assumes what I call the persona of the 'historian'.

Having adumbrated these basic tenets of normative narration, I hasten to point out that they are all commonly infringed - particularly in literary fiction, but also in natural narration. Yet the rhetorical and stylistic effects produced by the infringements are possible only because a narrative norm is in place. That is, the fact that artificial narratives, in particular, exhibit such features as flashbacks, prolepses, or other violations of chronology, or repeat the same events more than once (infringements of principle (c)); the fact that certain texts foreground description rather than events (infringing principle (b)), or play themselves out through a highly evaluated discourse that makes no attempt to conceal the narrator's subjectivity (which runs counter to principle (d)) - the fact that narratives commonly exhibit these marked features does not invalidate the notion of a narrative norm or prototype. To the contrary, without a norm - understood as a set of unmarked values for particular properties - the marked values could not produce the effects they do on listeners and readers.

Let us return now to the first of the four tenets, the crucial role of PAST tense in narration, and consider how this tense functions to define the prototypical narrative sentence.

5. Past tense and the narrative norm

I will assume tacit acceptance of the claim put forth above that the unmarked tense of narrative language is the PAST, specifically the PFV 'event' PAST (see n.4). But, as stated above, I do not construe this tense as a simple unanalyzable piece of grammatical information, but rather as a cluster concept involving a set of oppositional properties operative at the four levels of the linguistic system outlined above. Herring (1986) describes narrative discourse in terms of the unmarked values it carries for a set of properties which collectively define its unmarked tense: the
## Table 1. Markedness Oppositions for the Past and Present Tenses in Ordinary (Nonnarrative) Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL OF THE LINGUISTIC SYSTEM</th>
<th>REFERENTIAL</th>
<th>TEXTUAL</th>
<th>EXPRESSIVE</th>
<th>META-LINGUISTIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Properties</td>
<td>Time Aspect Semelfactivity</td>
<td>Sequentiality</td>
<td>Grounding Reality</td>
<td>Perceived Objectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRETERIT (M)</td>
<td>+ past + PFV + semelfactive</td>
<td>+ linked + fore-events ground(^2)</td>
<td>- realis(^1) + distant + objective</td>
<td>+ diegesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plus-interp.</td>
<td>+ past + PFV(^3) + semelfactive</td>
<td>+ linked + fore-events(^6) ground</td>
<td>- realis - distant - objective</td>
<td>+ diegesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRESENT (U)</td>
<td>0 past 0 PFV - semelfactive</td>
<td>0 linked 0 fore-events (^4)</td>
<td>0 realis 0 distant 0 objective</td>
<td>0 diegesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minus-interp.</td>
<td>- past - PFV ± semelfactive(^5)</td>
<td>- linked - fore-events ground</td>
<td>+ realis - distant - objective</td>
<td>- diegesis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(A plus sign indicates the presence of the "mark" in question, a minus sign its absence, and "0" the non-pertinence of the mark)

1. The [-realis] value of the PRET holds only for the context of non-narrative language; in narrative the values are reversed and the present is [+realis].
2. Though in ordinary language the PRET (PFV P) is a foregrounding tense (vis-à-vis the PR), in a narrative context it is [-foreground] since it is the expected (unmarked) tense for reporting events. This criterion for determining foreground departs from the conventional view in discourse studies which holds 'events', and therefore the PFV P, to be the foreground of a narrative.
3. The aspectual feature [+PFV] and the feature [+semelfactive] distinguish the PR\(_a\) from the PR\(_v\); the latter is [-PFV] and [+semelfactive].
4. 'Sequentiality' is variable for the reason that a series of events reported in the diegetic PR\(_a\) is not universally felt to convey the same sense of sequential cohesion as if the events had been reported in the PRET; for French in particular it has been argued that sequentiality is conveyed only by the passé simple.
5. The minus-interpretation of the English SIMPLE PR is habitual action, i.e. [-semelfactive].
The prototypical past-tense narrative is concerned with events, rather than static description; the events are narrated not in random order but in a sequence which is iconic with the temporal order in which they actually occurred. Moreover, the completion of one event is implied by the inception of the event that follows, a fact which may give rise to an interpretation of aspectual perfectivity for the PAST tense, where no other aspectual value is specifically indicated. The prototypical narrative is factual and time-bound, in that it chronicles a unique sequence of events which took place at a specific point (or over a specific bounded interval) in time. There is also a sense in which the ideal narrator is objective, maintaining a distance between him or herself and the events narrated in order to relate them as they actually occurred, in linear order, and with a minimum of personal evaluation or digression. It is this complex of features which, in the absence of indications to the contrary, the 'narrative PAST tense' typically evokes.

Though not intended as a definition, this description yields a profile of the prototypical sentence of narration, represented in Table 1 in the row labeled PRETERIT. The properties listed there are the 'marks' of this tense, grouped according to the functional-semantic component in which they operate.

Sentences of 'diegesis' typically have past time reference and perfective aspect; they offer a retrospectively distanced, objective perspective on events that are presented as realis, as semelfactive, and as sequentially ordered, from which we infer (via post hoc propter hoc) that they are also causally linked. One of the principal claims I wish to make here is that when in a narrative the PRESENT tense - or any tense other than the PRETERIT - is chosen, the narrator's objective (which is presumably unconscious, at least in natural narration) is to neutralize one or more of these properties that collectively define the PRETERIT as the unmarked tense of narration, and in turn establish the norms for narrative discourse.

The remainder of Table 1 contrasts the PRESENT and the PRETERIT with respect to this set of properties. The + values indicated are those that hold for nonnarrative language, where PRETERIT is marked and PRESENT unmarked.

6. Markedness and the present tense

As suggested at various points in Jakobson's writings, the unmarked term of an opposition can receive 3 possible interpretations.

According to the zero-interpretation, which is the broadest and most general, the presence or absence of a mark x is irrelevant; Jakobson calls this "non-signalization of x." For the PRESENT tense, this zero-interpretation is the basic meaning of 'timelessness' or 'a-temporality.' In the sentences in (4), the PRESENT is used not because it refers to a given time period but, to the contrary, because it is the only tense that can be used with minimal reference to time (cf. Dahl 1985).
An unmarked category in its zero-interpretation is often used precisely when the objective is to make no active reference to the mark. 

The minus-interpretation signals the absence of the feature associated with the marked category - what Jakobson referred to as "signalization of non-x." For the PRESENT tense, the minus-interpretation is the speaker’s present or 'present co-temporal with now', as in the sentences in (5):

(5) I have a splitting headache.
What time is it?

Only the minus-interpretation involves a positive reference to present time.

Finally, the unmarked term of an opposition may also have a plus-interpretation, which is fostered by a specific context. The plus-interpretation is the one that could also be signalled by the marked term. For the PRESENT tense this is the meaning of 'past time' that surfaces specifically - and exclusively - in narrative contexts, as in (2), repeated here as (6):

(6) I'm sitting in my office when all of a sudden the whole damn building starts to shake!

But although both PAST and PRESENT can be used to refer to past events, the two are not therefore equivalent. Given the availability of forms specifically marked for pastness which could report a past situation more directly, the choice of a PRESENT always involves some special information. Use of the PRESENT tense in narrative enables particular TEXTUAL or EXPRESSIVE effects precisely because the meanings 'simultaneity with now' (the minus-interpretation) or 'non-specification of temporality' (the zero-interpretation) are always open. In the case of the Historical Present, which I subsume under the broader heading of diegetic presents (cf. n.6), it is the play between the reading 'simultaneity with now' offered by the tense itself in its minus-interpretation and the explicit rejection of this reading in the rest of the discourse - the temporality of narrative is always past - that fosters the common perception that events are taking place before the speaker's eyes.

The REFERENTIAL, TEXTUAL, and METALINGUISTIC properties which the PRESENT in its plus-interpretation shares with the PRETERIT (see Table 1 again) collectively define a variety of diegetic PRESENT that I will refer to as the diegetic 'action' PRESENT, i.e., the variety of PRESENT used to report events, as in the second clause of (6). The properties of this PRESENT include, in addition to occurrence in diegesis proper: past time reference, perfective aspect, reference to unique situations, the ability to foreground, and, as a contextual implicature, sequentiality (qualifications regarding the properties of foregrounding and sequentiality are indicated in the notes to Table 1). Where the diegetic PRESENT differs from the PRETERIT is primarily with regard to properties located in the EXPRESSIVE component. 'Lack of distance' and 'lack of objectivity' are features characteristic
not of narration but verbalizations of experience in which the activities of seeing and speaking are synchronized, e.g. sportscasts or eyewitness news coverage - what Casparis (1975) has labeled 'current reports'. In narration the rule is 'live first, tell later' (or for vicarious narrations 'observe first, tell later'), whereas in current report genres speakers verbalize what they see as they see it, appropriately in the PRESENT tense. These two features of the minus-interpretation of the PRESENT, 'lack of distance' and 'lack of objectivity', derive from the cognitive limitations inherent in trying to verbalize what one sees or experiences while it is happening. But unlike other features of the minus interpretation, these two are not overridden in a narrative context. They remain with a minus value, and it is in part because they are nonnegotiable that narrators will choose the marked PRESENT tense (-marked in a narrative context) over the unmarked PRETERIT to accomplish particular TEXTUAL and EXPRESSIVE goals.

The features listed in Table 1 in the row labelled 'minus-interpretation' collectively define the 'present co-temporal with now'. With one exception they can be redefined in 'positive' terms which express more transparently the nuances that emerge in the interplay between plus- and minus-interpretations that is always a possibility whenever the PRESENT tense is used in narration. These positive readings are given in Table 2:
Table 2. *Markedness Values for the 'Present Cotemporal with Now'*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Referential</th>
<th>Textual</th>
<th>Expressive</th>
<th>Meta-Linguistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Aspect Grounding</td>
<td>Reality</td>
<td>Discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semelfactivity</td>
<td>Sequenchiality</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minus interp.</td>
<td>past - PFV</td>
<td>± semelfactive</td>
<td>-linked</td>
<td>+realis -distant-objective -diegesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively defined</td>
<td>now IPFV</td>
<td>repeatable, dura-</td>
<td>-foreground</td>
<td>here- immediate subjective; description; mimesis (i.e. speech)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dative</td>
<td>tive events</td>
<td>events; suspended event line</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now defined as habitual events; suspended event line.
Thus redefined, [-past] translates as 'now', [-PFV] as IPFV, and [-semelfactive] as iterative or habitual; non-linked events are those that detach themselves from the event line, breaking or suspending it, while the most 'realis' events, epistemologically as well as linguistically, are those that take place here-and-now. Likewise in the expressive component, 'lack of distance' translates as immediacy, while a 'lack of objectivity' in reporting translates as subjectivity, yielding a text in which the contents of a story world are highly evaluated. Finally, on the metalinguistic level, sentences of a narrative text that are not diegetic will be either sentences of description, of directly reported speech, or of narrator commentary, which is also a type of direct speech (cf. n.6).

As shown in Table 1, the diegetic PRESENT, which occurs specifically in a narrative context, privileges a number of 'marks' which the PRESENT shares with the PRETERIT. However, the stylistic effects that listeners or readers commonly perceive in narratives that make use of the diegetic PRESENT derive not from the plus-interpretation but from meanings contributed by the tense in its minus-interpretation or zero-interpretation, i.e., from meanings which the PRESENT does not share with the PRETERIT. The reasoning behind this statement should be apparent: narrators will choose the PRESENT - or any other marked tense - to obtain meanings that the PRETERIT cannot offer. For example, the 'atemporality' of the PRESENT in its zero-interpretation makes it possible to detach events from a particular historical moment and endow them with a sense of timelessness. This lack of active reference to time, together with the 'non-semelfactive' feature of the PRESENT, motivates use of this tense for genres in which events are for one reason or another regarded as non-unique. Among these genres are jokes, tall tales, and myths, which in addition privilege the 'irrealis' feature that the PRESENT acquires in narrative through a markedness reversal.

As for meanings contributed by the minus-interpretation (see Table 2), it should now be apparent that the 'eyewitness' perspective of current reports derives from a combination of tense and aspect features expressing 'simultaneity with now'. The descriptive capacity of the PRESENT (an implicature of its IPFV aspect), together with its optional non-sequential feature, motivates use of this tense to isolate or detach situations from the routine queue for a close-up view, while the ability of the PRESENT to interrupt or suspend the narrative event-line makes possible the suspense that typically accompanies peaks of narrative tension, which in natural narration are frequently reported in the PRESENT tense. The fact that the PRESENT is the unmarked tense of the mimetic rather than the diegetic mode, the tense of speech, motivates its use to transform routine narration into 'performed stories' (see Wolfson 1979), thereby emphasizing, above and beyond the information value of a story, its value as entertainment, as a piece of verbal artistry. Finally, the immediacy and subjectivity of the PRESENT motivate its use for 'internal evaluation' (cf. Schiffrin 1981, Silva-Corvalán 1983, Fleischman 1986a), as well as for Interior Monologue, which purports to be a direct representation, unmediated by a narrator's language, of the unverbalized thoughts of fictional characters.

Tables similar to Table 1 could be drawn up to contrast the PRETERIT with the other marked tenses of narrative, notably the PERFECT, the IMPERFECT, and the PRESENT-tense counterpart of the latter, the 'visualizing' PRESENT (cf. n.10).
7. Tense in texts

Having outlined the basic tenets of my theory, which characterizes narrative discourse in terms of markedness values for a set of properties that collectively define its unmarked tense, the PFV PAST, I propose now to illustrate the link between tense and narrativity by looking at some of the exceptions that prove the rule, i.e., at storytelling genres that violate some or all of the basic tenets of normative narration set forth in §4 above, and which, accordingly, choose not the PAST but the PRESENT as the primary grammatical vehicle of the discourse. The texts I will refer to would now all fall under the heading of fiction,¹² inasmuch as natural narratives are never PRESENT-based. Though natural narrators commonly switch in and out of the PRESENT tense (cf. Wolfson 1979, Schiffrin 1981, Silva-Corvalán 1983), the PRESENT is never the unmarked or base tense of conversational storytelling.

The genres I consider in this connection in my book make seemingly strange bedfellows: from the standpoint of literary criticism or literary history there is little in common between early Romance epic poetry, in particular the Old French chansons de geste; the popular ballad texts of 14th- and 15th-century Spain known collectively as the romancero; modern present-tense fiction, in particular by Virginia Woolf; and the postmodern French novels of the 1950’s and 60’s that have come to be known as the nouveaux romans (New Novels). The only thing these genres appear to have in common is their reliance on the PRESENT as the unmarked tense of the discourse. As schematized in Table 3 below, if the PAST tense serves as the grammatical vehicle for the activity of narration - understood as a retrospective discourse whose data source is memory, the memory of a speaker for whom the past has become an objective knowledge, to be reported in the diegetic mode of the historian -, then the PRESENT tense provides a grammatical vehicle for a different activity and a different type of discourse: a discourse not of memory but of perception, spoken not by an historian who remembers but by a performer, who purports to re-enact what he sees as he sees it, to offer a mimetic representation of words and events rather than a narration.

Table 3. Correlates of PAST and PRESENT tenses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tense</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Narrating Persona</th>
<th>Mode of Reporting</th>
<th>Associated Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PAST</td>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>Historian</td>
<td>Diegetic</td>
<td>Narration: I speak what has become an objective knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRESENT</td>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>Performer</td>
<td>Mimetic</td>
<td>Observation-representation: I speak what I see (as I see it)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus I would argue that in texts that privilege the PRESENT tense, a major function of this tense is metalinguistic: to announce a discourse that is not narrative, but
anti-narrative, constituting itself in opposition to the norms of narrative discourse. Just as a text that begins "This guy walks into a bar and says to the bartender..." will immediately be construed by listeners to be a joke, while the same anecdote begun in the PAST tense will be construed as a narration of realis events, so too fiction that relies entirely or predominantly on the PRESENT tense thereby announces itself as something other than bona fide narration: what I would call storytelling "against the grain."

Space limitations preclude offering a demonstration of my claims about tense and narrativity with textual data from the various genres to which I have referred; accordingly, I will try to make the case with reference to the two genres seemingly furthest from one another as literary forms: the premodern French epic and the postmodern nouveaux romans.

8. Present-tense fiction

Primary epic poetry confronts us with a special kind of storytelling in which narrativity, in the sense of a linear presentation of events informed by temporal and causal logic, is subordinated to other dimensions of a genre which is at once story, song, performance, and ritual. Participants in epic storytelling events are generally familiar with the stories, thus chronology can be fragmented or reversed - it can even contradict itself. The same scenes and events are frequently repeated with variations (cf. Fleischman 1986b). Time in the epic has been characterized as moving in circular patterns rather than advancing in a straight line.

Linguists who study narrative generally agree that the backbone of a narration consists of the units of information that move narrative time forward, i.e., the sequence of ordered events (cf. Labov 1972, Dry 1983). But in the Old French chansons de geste the movement from one strophe, or laisse, to another often does not correspond to a progression in story time. In many laisses the only 'events' are speech-events, given the tendency in epic for information to be reported dramatically through quoted speech - monologue and dialogue. Even in laisses like the one from The Song of Roland given in (7) below, that contain a significant amount of 'action' in rigorous sequence, narrative time is halted rather than advanced; movement in this laisse, in which all verbs but the last are in the PRESENT tense, is rather akin to marching in place:

(7) The count STRIKES him so powerfully,
he SPLITS his helmet in two through the nosepiece,
CUTS THROUGH the nose, the mouth, the teeth,
down through the trunk and the halberk of Eastern mail,
[through] the two silver bows of that golden saddle
and deep into the horse’s back.
He killed them both,... (Roland, 1644-50)

In this rendering of the conventional 'epic blow', we observe the path of Roland’s sword as it cuts through the pagan’s helmet, his nose, mouth, teeth, body, his silver saddle, and ultimately through his horse. Only after this sequence of acts is de-
scribed in the PRESENT is the 'macro-event' which subsumes them all chronicled in the PASSÉ SIMPLE: "he killed them both." The chronicle line is the only one that advances narrative time; otherwise the action is visualized, as if under a slow-motion camera, broken down into its component elements, and only at the end set unobtrusively into the documentary record of the past. Passages describing the epic blow, like those describing many of the ritualized gestures of epic action, are not intended to advance story time but to reveal the qualities of an agent. Whence the choice of an IPFV descriptive tense rather than the narrativizing, historicizing PS.

Epic is also a genre in which the events of story-worlds become detached from their historical origins and enter a kind of timeless realm where the historical past and present come together. The chanson de geste, as one critic has remarked, "was conceived not as an historical account of things past, but as a re-enactment of events in the present" (Hatcher 1946), their symbolic aspect underscored by the PRESENT tense, which seems to "divest them of their temporal contingencies" (Grunmann-Gaudet 1980). Another commentator characterizes the genre as "a commemorative dramatization of the founding events of a national past" (Goldin 1978), a drama in which historical agents and events shed their ephemeral pastness and enter the timeless realm of legend, a drama re-enacted with each performance through the timeless PRESENT tense.

A discourse that is timeless, in the sense of collapsing the experiential past, present, and future, relies appropriately on a tense which can avoid a commitment to explicit temporality and to profiling events as completed, as over. This tense is the PRESENT. Its IPFV aspect allows situations to be presented as not yet completed; yet unlike the IMPERFECT, which likewise presents situations as non-completed, the PRESENT makes no explicit reference to pastness. Though I would argue that the meaning of PRESENT tense that is privileged in epic is the 'timeless' meaning, associated with the zero-interpretation, it is the meaning of 'presentness', associated with the minus-interpretation, that is responsible for the effect of vividness commonly perceived in uses of PRESENT tense in narration, particularly in epic.

It has often been observed that epic poets speak as if they were on the scene of events, giving a hypothetical eyewitness account of a spectacle taking place before their eyes. Although the relationship of epic singers to their material is in principle one of restrospection rather than simultaneity, of memory rather than perception, their reporting technique is closer to the current report formula. Like a sportscast, The Song of Roland moves back and forth between PRESENT and PAST, as the singer shifts between a performative mode of descriptive visualization and an historical or documentary mode of chronistic reporting. In a thought-provoking paper comparing storytelling techniques in Old French and Old Ukrainian epics, Burbelo (1986) refers to the unmarked mode of reporting information in epic universally as "dynamic description," a linguistic compromise between the dynamic movement of narration and the stasis of description. As seen in our example from Roland, action reported in the PRESENT tense is action that is visualized, as in pictorial or cinematic narration.

In my view, the discourse of Old French epics cannot properly be characterized as narration. It is rather what Goldin (1978) has called "a circumspection." The
primary building blocks of narrative - events - are typically fragmented into their constituent acts, which are not narrated but described. Epic poets sing what they see, bringing a legendary past to life in dramatic performance where it becomes imbricated with the listeners' present. The reporting mode of the historian is subordinated to that of the performer and on-the-scene-observer, whose repetitive, achronological, disjunctive brand of storytelling is played out predominantly through the PRESENT tense.

Skipping ahead several centuries, we observe in the French New Novels a similar, if this time conscious, attempt to break with certain of the basic tenets of normative narration such as a linear chronology, temporally and causally linked events, semelfactive events, and a contrast between events and description, with an understood priority of the events. In several of these respects the New Novels return to a textual practice observed in vernacular epics, notwithstanding fundamental differences between the two genres in ideology, compositional technique, and cultural and pragmatic context.

In texts like Robbe-Grillet's Jealousy, Michel Butor's Second Thoughts (the English title of La Modification), or Claude Simon's The Flanders Road, there is essentially no timeline, no linear sequence of events. Attempts to discern a narrative line are doomed to failure, for "narrative time" in these texts does not advance. As Robbe-Grillet observes in one of his theoretical essays (1965), "insofar as the modern novel is concerned most often with mental structures, which are devoid of time,...time in these novels seems to be cut off from temporality. It no longer passes." Tenses in the New Novel are used to obliterate the perception of passing time that they normally evoke in narrative discourse. The PRESENT tense that serves as the grammatical vehicle of these novels is thus not an Historical Present, which by definition refers to past events, but a PRESENT that refers to the 'now' of the speaker of the text, who in conventional narration we would call 'the narrator'. The "action" of these novels is for the most part a verbal representation of the thoughts and perceptions of that speaker as they imprint themselves on his or her consciousness. Banishing narrative time from his novels, Robbe-Grillet constructs them on the foundation of a "perpetual present," his stated objective being not to create a dynamic linear pattern of events but to represent a totality, a static whole resembling a picture, as in the passage from Jealousy given in (8) below.

In this passage, the focalizing eye of the protagonist, a jealous husband, scrutinizes the minute movements of his wife like the zoom lens of a video camera in slow-motion. His vision - cognitive as well as sensory - is severely distorted by his physical proximity to focalized objects and by the slats of the blinds through which he stares (les jalousies in French), a reification of his own profoundly distorting jalousie (all PRESENT tenses are coded in upper case):

(8) It IS only at a distance of less than a yard that the elements of a discontinuous landscape APPEAR in the successive intervals [of the slates of the blinds], parallel chinks separated by the wider slats of grey wood: the turned wood balusters, the empty chair, the low table where a full glass IS STANDING beside the tray holding the two bottles, and then the top part of the head of black hair, which at this moment TURNS toward
the right, where above the table SHOWS a bare forearm, dark brown in color, and its paler hand holding the ice bucket. A...’s voice THANKS the boy. The brown hand DISAPPEARS. The shiny metal bucket, which IS IMMEDIATELY FROSTED OVER, REMAINS where it has been set on the tray beside the two bottles.

The knot of A...’s hair, seen at such close range from behind, SEEMS to be extremely complicated. IT IS DIFFICULT TO FOLLOW the convolutions of different strands: several solutions SEEM POSSIBLE at some places, and in others none... (Jealousy, pp. 59-60)

Scrutinized at such close range, the figure of the wife can only appear fragmented: a hand, a forearm, a knot of hair, its individual strands; a voice not a character thanks the boy. Verbalizing his perceptions as he watches, appropriately in the PRESENT tense, the jealous husband is unable to gain perspective on focalized objects. What helps to create this 'out-of-focus' perspective is the IPFV aspect of the PRESENT tense, which enables situations to be presented with no observable beginnings or end points, as simply ongoing.

Robbe-Grillet’s novel proceeds unrelentingly in this fashion, with all sense of narrativity stifled by the overwhelming minutiae of descriptions that seem to go nowhere, or at least nowhere they haven’t been before. For just as the same events and descriptions are frequently repeated in the epics, so too the nouveaux romans frequently return to events, scenes, gestures, and objects which we have already encountered.

In a penetrating study of the representation of consciousness in fiction, Dorrit Cohn (1978) coins the term "memory monologues" to refer to novels like Claude Simon’s The Flanders Road that read like interior monologues verbalizing the activity of remembering. In memory monologues the logic of the discourse bears no relation to a temporally ordered story-world; events are de-chronologized, and the only ‘continuity’ is that of the spontaneously remembering mind, the only the logic that of "the private associations that determine mnemonic thought sequences" (Cohn, p.183). It is therefore not surprising that The Flanders Road, again like the epics, contains cataphoric references to events that have not yet occurred in the story-world at the point in the text at which they are reported. In the case of epic storytelling, such violations of chronology were unproblematic inasmuch as the plots were familiar; since listeners already knew the story of the battle of Roncevaux, it posed no problem to violate chronology in The Song of Roland by making reference to the villain’s treason in the PAST tense at the outset of the text, even though the betrayal would not play itself out until considerably later in the story. In The Flanders Road de-chronologization is problematic only to the extent that the reader insists on discerning a chronology in the text. For in effect, the reader of a New Novel is typically supposed to feel that the configurational operation that transforms unordered reality into an ordered narration has been disabled.

The French New Novelists have often been referred to as l’école du regard, ‘the school of the look’ - a label which derives from a particular way of writing that seeks to exclude anything beyond what the eye can see and what can be apprehended by purely visual perception. Critics consistently note the prominence of visual images in the textual practice of these writers (see in particular Britton
The reader of a New Novel becomes of necessity a spectator, an observer of visual reality in its microscopic detail. Sartre's *Nausea* opens with the following statement by the protagonist Roquentin:

(9) The best thing would be to write down events from day to day. Keep a diary to see clearly - let none of the nuances or small happenings escape even though they might seem to mean nothing. And above all, classify them. I must tell how I see this table, this street, the people, my packet of tobacco, since *those* are the things which have changed. I must determine the exact extent and nature of this change... I must...carefully detail all that happens. Naturally, I can write nothing definite about Saturday and the day-before-yesterday business. I am already too far from it... (*Nausea*, p.7)

Among the striking features of this mode of writing, we observe a shrinking of the 'event' as the crucial component of storytelling and a need to work in fine descriptive detail; an insistence on 'how' rather than 'when'; and above all, a desire to record what one sees, what is happening, at the moment - the very antithesis of the 'narrative statements' of historiographic discourse given in (3), which retrospectively invest acts and actors with meanings. Narrative in the traditional sense of a causally related sequence of past events has undergone a radical transformation; the thrust of the postmodern novel is the evocation of a milieu in the present, which reaches us filtered through a strongly visual focalizer - several critics have suggested a camera eye - that circles around objects and agents, registering its perceptions in a discourse dominated by the descriptive PRESENT tense.

Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* has been interpreted alternately as an extreme example of narrative objectivity - the purely visual perceptions of a focalizing 'eye' behind which we have little sense of a focalizing 'I', and as an example of total subjectivity - the obsessive interior monologue of a tormented psyche. Both interpretations motivate the use of PRESENT tense. For on the one hand, the PRESENT is the tense of a discourse that claims to be a *description* of the world as it offers itself directly, in the present, to the perception of a speaking subject. And on the other, the PRESENT is the tense of interior monologue, the discourse form that purports to offer an unmediated representation of subjectivity. In either case, we have to do with verbal representations that are unconcerned with time movement and sequences of events - the essence of narrativity - and unmediated by retrospective reflection or a configurational act. And in either case what is at issue is not the Historical Present, whose temporality is past, but a PRESENT whose temporal reference is to the 'now' of the speaking or thinking subject, the Present co-temporal with now.

One final point concerning the French New Novel: this genre has been referred to as a 'literature of speech,' insofar as many of the novels seek to move the language of literary fiction closer to that of ordinary conversation, whose unmarked tense is also the PRESENT. The passage given in (10) below is a diegetic passage from Michel Butor's *Second Thoughts*, a novel that attempts to tell a story in the second person (*vous*). Keep in mind that this passage is not directly or indirectly...
reported speech; it is the analogue for this genre of straight narration in a properly narrative text. It articulates the thoughts of the speaker-protagonist as he scrutinizes his own behavior while sitting in the compartment of a train.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{quote}
(10) \textit{There you go again} playing that game you get into so often, giving names to your fellow passengers; but \textit{this one’s} not really right for \textit{that} little boy \textit{wriggling} in his seat, who’s so much younger than \textit{your} son \textit{now}; better call him, \textit{let’s say}, André; [and] the woman who’s \textit{holding} his hand and \textit{taking him out} will be Madame Polliat; as for the young couple, \textit{forget} the literary allusions, just Pierre, and, \textit{let’s see}, Cécile is \textit{out of the question}, but Agnès would do just fine... (p. 118)
\end{quote}

Clearly this is not narration in the Historical Present, whose time reference is past; at issue here is the Present co-temporal with now, the tense of a silent speaker observing his own actions in the present and commenting on them to himself.

The various uses of the Present-tense discussed in this section are summarized in Table 4 (cf. also Table 3).

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Use} & \textbf{Example} \\
\hline
Arresting narrative time movement & Ex. 7 \\
Scrambling story chronology & \textit{chansons de geste}, \textit{nouveaux romans} \\
‘Timeless’ storytelling & Exx. 7, 8 \\
Reporting action as \textit{visualized} & Exx. 7-9 \\
Representing direct perceptions (rather than remembered experience) & Exx. 7-9 \\
Privileging description (over events) & Ex. 10 \\
Interior monologue/storytelling as ‘speech’ & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Uses of the Present tense in Fiction}
\end{table}

9. Conclusion

In a number of respects, as we have seen, the textual practice of the New Novels resembles that of orally performed epics: both genres foreground the visual and privilege description over events; both destabilize chronology and develop a fiction not through linearity but through circularity - repetition and parallelism of words, events, even entire scenes; both opt for a paratactic organization of content units which are simply juxtaposed to one another, their order governed by no overriding temporal or causal logic; and in different ways, both construct a discourse in which speech figures prominently.

In drawing this comparison I do not mean to imply that the artistic objectives of epic singers and postmodern novelists are at all the same, nor their reasons for incorporating these features into their respective textual praxis. I invoke the commonalities principally with a view toward demonstrating, in the context of a
theory of tense and narrativity, the motivations in both genres for the use of the marked PRESENT tense.

The choice of a tense - in literature as in natural language - is clearly more than just a grammatical agenda. Sartre once observed (1947) that the tense of a text holds the key to its special strangeness. Taking this observation further, I conclude here by noting that texts which rely on the PRESENT as the basic grammatical vehicle of their discourse are texts which in different but not dissimilar ways move away from the narrative prototype toward the monologic and dialogic genres - the lyric and drama respectively - genres whose unmarked tense is likewise the PRESENT. And in making this move, these texts privilege a metalinguistic function of the PRESENT tense, which is to make a statement about the language of a text, to announce 'this is not a narrative' - according to the rules of narrative's own game.

Notes

1. Given that many languages package tense information and aspect information together in the same morphology, it will be useful to adopt the hybrid category label 'tense-aspect'.

2. The term 'artificial' narratives was coined by Van Dijk (1975) as an umbrella label for the varieties of narrative found in stories, novels, and other types of literature, as well as myths, folktales, epics, etc. - in contrast to the 'natural' narratives produced spontaneously in conversation.

3. For example, it has been widely observed that the relationships between time and tense in narrative often differ from those obtaining in nonnarrative language. Different too are the possibilities for expressing degrees of temporal distance (narrative contexts typically exhibit fewer tense distinctions). Moreover, certain languages have special morphology, including tense-aspect morphology, that is exclusive to narrative (see Dahl 1985).

4. For languages with a PERFECTIVE/IMPERFECTIVE (PFV/IPFV) opposition, the unmarked tense of narrative discourse is the PFV (i.e., the event-reporting) PAST. When used without qualification, PAST should be understood as referring specifically to the PFV PAST, alternately called the PRETERIT.

5. Halliday & Hasan refer to the first three components as IDEATIONAL, TEXTUAL, and INTERPERSONAL, Traugott as PROPOSITIONAL, TEXTUAL, and EXPRESSIVE. While the first two of their categories are virtually equivalent, EXPRESSIVE has the advantage over INTERPERSONAL in not being limited to interactive phenomena. For what is communicated at this level is not only the interpersonal, i.e., information about the relationship between speech-act participants but also, and equally important, the personal, i.e., the speaker's perspective on, or evaluations of, elements of the text.

The assignment of tense-aspect functions to the components of this model is not always a clear-cut issue. Nor is the model adopted here the only one appropriate to the classification of tense-aspect functions; an advantage it has over other functional models is relative simplicity - only four categories, which are, moreover, sufficiently broad to account for a considerable number
of tense-aspect functions.

6. The term 'diegesis', which goes back to Plato's Republic, is used here to refer to sentences of narration proper. As used in this sense, diegetic sentences contrast with two other sentence types occurring in narrative: directly quoted speech, which is 'mimetic' (an imitation of real speech), and narrator commentary, which is neither mimetic (being not a representation of speech but speech itself) nor diegetic (referring not to the story-world but to the world of the narrator at the time of the telling). This meaning of diegesis underlies the term 'diegetic PR', used here as a cover term for the several varieties of PRESENT tense whose time reference is to the past of the story-world.

7. As indicated in the notes to Table 1, for certain properties the markedness values are reversed in a narrative context where PRETERIT is unmarked and PRESENT marked.

8. This application of Jakobson's categories to tense oppositions follows the analysis in Waugh (1982).

9. I adhere to the view that the primary or basic meaning of the PRESENT tense is 'timelessness' or 'temporal neutrality', which is another way of saying that it is inherently unmarked for time. As Bolinger (1947:436) states it: "We might call the simple present tense the BASE TENSE, to which all other tenses are oriented but which is itself oriented to nothing, expressing merely the FACT OF PROCESS. The simple present...is 'timeless' not in the sense of 'eternal' but of 'non-committal about time'... Whenever, then, the speaker wishes to avoid the confinement of time implicit in the other tenses, he uses the simple present."

10. The PRESENT of the first clause of (6), which I refer to as the 'visualizing' PRESENT, is used for making descriptive statements rather than for narrating events. In English the diegetic action PRESENT is coded by the simple present-tense form, the diegetic visualizing PRESENT by the progressive form. In French, as in many languages, there is no formal opposition to disambiguate these two varieties of PRESENT, which correlate respectively with the PFV/IPFV tenses of the PAST system.

11. Most discourse, narrative or other, is not spoken or written on a uniform level of excitement or tension. There is mounting and declining tension, generally within a global cumulative development. As Longacre (1981) suggests, it is the peaks of discourse intensity that mark out the 'profile' of a text which includes one or more such units. Narrative peaks are marked in surface syntax in various ways, including by a shift into PRESENT tense.

12. I say "now" because the chansons de geste, epic songs from medieval France, constituted the popular historiography of their time and were believed by their audiences to be credible accounts of historical events. I address elsewhere (Fleischman 1983) the problem of discriminating 'history' from 'fiction' in the Middle Ages, whose criteria for defining these categories differ from our own.

13. Few languages have a PFV/IPFV contrast for present time; the PRESENT in most languages is either IPFV or aspectually neutral (Comrie 1976).
14. Following Genette (1980), literary narratologists distinguish between narrative 'voice' (who speaks? who is the narrator?) and 'focalization' (who sees?, whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?). The two may or may not coincide.

15. In this English rendering of the passage, which I have adapted from the published translation so as to preserve the colloquial register of the original, I italicize all marks of 'speech' including the tenses of discours.

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