



## THE USE OF NARRATIVE DISCOURSE TO STUDY THE PAST TENSE MARKERS IN KANNADA-ENGLISH BILINGUAL CHILDREN

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the use of past tense markers, discourse markers and pronoun use in English L2 children using narrative discourse. The data is elicited from children between 6 and 9 years of age through story narration as an already occurred event which makes it an obligatory context for providing past tense markers by the children. The focus of the study is to ascertain if the use of past-tense in L2 learners of English in ESL context follow the 'order of acquisition' as observed by Brown (1973) in L1 study, Dulay and Burt (1974a, b) in their L2 'morpheme order acquisition' studies. The study is looked at from two underlying theoretical framework, the 'innatist' and the 'functionalist' framework and aims at providing empirical evidence through formal experiment will test the hypotheses; if the order of acquisition (Brown, 1973) that the an English speaking child goes through is comparable to children learning English as ESL learners and will also add to the existing research.

**Keywords:** *Narratives, Bilingualism, Past Tense Marker, Order Of Acquisition.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Language development is the crucial part of the human cognitive nature and learning a language is one of the most impressive and intriguing human accomplishments. As children we acquired at least one language and since then have probably acquired one or more than one language being used around us and most probably through the process of becoming "educated". The former becomes our "first language"

(L1) and the latter our "second language" (L2). The scope of SLA includes informal L2 learning that takes place in naturalistic contexts, formal L2 learning that takes place in classrooms, and L2 learning that involves a mixture of these settings and circumstances. SLA as a field of study opens up avenues in understanding several issues like:

1. The characteristic features of the target language people acquire?



2. How does the learner acquire this knowledge?
3. Why are some learners more successful than others?

Language being a complex communication system, is analysed on a number of levels: phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, lexis, pragmatics and discourse. One such aspect of language which is widely studied and researched is that of 'morphemes' and is a very vital component of language. The control of syntax and morphology is seen as 'central' to language learning.

The current study investigates the acquisition of morphemes in a new dimension, that of learners of English as a second language whose L1 is Kannada and primarily focusses on the use of inflectional morphemes used to mark 'past tense'. The percentage distribution between regular and irregular, the transitive and intransitive verbs is also considered.

To understand the whole concept of morpheme acquisition it is important for us as researchers to understand some basic concepts. Morphemes can be classified into lexical or grammatical, depending on the fact that they "contain" meaning on their own or they modify the meaning. For instance, dog is a lexical morpheme since it has a meaning on its own and it does not need any other particle to convey meaning; however, 'the' is a grammatical morpheme since it modifies the meaning of the word behind but it cannot convey meaning on its own. In this study, we will focus our attention on grammatical morphemes, which are also called functors.

Grammatical morphemes or functors can be classified in free and bound. The former morpheme are ones which can function independently as words (his, a, the, etc.) and the latter are morphemes which appear as parts of words which is accounted for in this study. Most of the bound morphemes in English are prefixes, suffixes or affixes (walking, talked, tables, etc.). Inflectional morphemes are those which do not affect the meaning but they are added to another morph or group of morphs in order to change the function of the word indicating tense, case, number or other grammatical features. Some

examples of inflectional morphemes are the -ed past morpheme, the -ing progressive or the -s plural. In our study we will focus our attention only on inflectional morphemes.

The basic premise of 'morpheme studies' is that there exists as a consistent order in which first and/or second language learners acquire proficiency in the use of grammatical morphemes. This is an extension of Chomsky's 'Universal Grammar' which argues that there is an innate core of abstract knowledge about language form, which pre-specifies a framework for all human languages and that the child acquiring any language (a second language in the present context) goes through stages of development which otherwise is termed as 'systematicity' (Mitchell and Myles, 2013, p13).

#### **STUDIES IN L1 & L2 ACQUISITION**

Dulay and Burt (1974b) argue that children acquiring first language go through developmental stages and these stages are very similar across children for a given language, although the rate at which individual children progress through them varies. These stages are similar across languages. Empirical studies conducted inspired greatly by the work of Roger Brown (1973) mirror the same.

Even before Brown, Berko (1958), provided experimental evidence that children have a tacit understanding of morphological rules of language within English, and were able to extend them when dealing with new words. She tested for knowledge of regular inflectional morphology: the plural -s of nouns, the two possessive forms of the noun (the of genitive and the 's genitive), the third person singular -s, the regular past tense form, the present participle -ing as well as the comparative and the superlative of the adjective.

Roger Brown produced a definitive study of morphological development in English. He views the acquisition of a first language by very young children as occurring in a series of stages and provided evidence to support this claim. He also opined that, at each of these stages, more features of the language of the parents appear, yet the language of the child is not a fragment of the mother tongue; instead, it remains as a simpler system with its own internal consistencies; a version or a dialect of the



mother tongue, albeit much less powerful than the version spoken by adults.

Brown's (1973) study whose subjects were three children who were native speakers of American English. Brown's findings included the observation that the three children learned English morphemes in roughly the same order, although they did not acquire them at the same age. His investigations found striking similarities in the language learning behaviour of the children. Brown felt that the similarity in the subjects' order of acquisition was particularly interesting because the pattern of development was clear despite the fact that the data were drawn from spontaneous speech. Brown when studying the emergence of a number of structures in English, found a consistent 'order of acquisition' and came up with 14 grammatical morphemes in English and the order in which the children acquired them.

The following table gives the rank order in the order of acquisition given by both Brown in his L1 study and Dulay and Burt in their L2 study.

	L2 Rank Order (Brown1973)	L1 Rank Order (Dulay and Burt 1974a)
<i>-ing</i>	1	3
Past irregular	2	6
Possessive	3	7
Article	4	1
Past regular	5	5
3rdperson Singular	6	8
Copula	7	2
Auxiliary	8	4

Dulay found in their study that the acquisition sequences obtained from different groups of children were very much similar even when the children were at different levels of proficiency in English. They conclude that: "Children of different language backgrounds learning English in a variety of host country environments acquire eleven grammatical morphemes in a similar order". This current study looks at only the past tense marker because of the limitations that the study poses and the insufficiency of the available data.

The focus of the paper is to answer the following broad research questions:

1. Does the acquisition of inflectional morphemes conform to the order of acquisition given by Brown?
2. Does the learners use of morphological forms to exhibit past tense comparable to L1 learners?
3. What accounts for any departure from the predicted path that is observed in the study?

In a study by Dittmar (1984), he says that "time is mostly expressed either lexically or through contextual inference, rather than through grammatical encoding".

Bardovi-Harlig's (1998) three successive stages namely the pragmatic stage, lexical stage and the morphological stage also gives the impetus for the present study where the learner are assumed to have crossed the first two stages and use verb morphology (tense and aspect) as indicators of temporality. Bardovi-Harlig claim that tense and aspect morphology "emerges" in interlanguage in regular sequences.

The following section gives a theoretical background to the present study and treats each component of language investigated separately.

#### **PAST TENSE MARKER**

The purpose of tense is to order events along a time line- to situate events with reference to other events (Ayoun and Salaberry,2008). Researchers researching in this area have long noted that grammatical morphemes, particularly those associated with the verb (tense), cause problems for language learners of various populations, including first language (L1) learners (Brown, 1973), second language (L2) learners (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1974). The past tense form in English referring to completed events results in one word verb forms, like ate and walked and a child's earliest verbs are rarely marked for tense (Nicoladis and Paradis).

Even though children start using past tense morphemes on verbs as early as two years, there are omission errors and overgeneralization of the morpheme -ed (Berko, 1958, Rice and Wexler, 2001, 2005). Pinker, Errors made by learners in language production serve as evidence that indicates the



development of linguistic competence. The present study on past tense morpheme use sheds light, in terms of the frequency (percentage) of usage of regular and irregular verbs and the errors that is evident in the participant's language production.

Sato's 1990 study of Thanh and Tai found that the two boys typically expressed past time either adverbially or through inference from the discourse context.

The present study also accounts for the verb type used, finite verbs which are governed by the person and the number of object and the infinitive where the verb is used in the base form and usually used with 'to'.

### METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

A group of 25, 6-9 year olds, studying in English as L2 will participate in this study. The average age of the participants were 7 years 4 months and all the participants live in the urban locales of Hyderabad, India and come from mid socio economic status group and study in the same primary school. The medium of instruction was English and they have an exposure to English ranging from 2-6 years and have had academic instruction in English from 2-4 years. The children were selected through random sampling. A testing instrument was developed to elicit uniform oral samples from the participants.

### TEST ADMINISTRATION/ PROCEDURE

The classroom where the instrument was administered had a predetermined pool of potential participants. Based on their voluntary participation, actual participation in the study was selected from the volunteers meeting the criteria. The task involved the participants to narrate a story looking at pictures. They were confronted with a series of twelve black and white pictures and were asked to narrate a story from the pictures (see Appendix A). The narration which is a way of eliciting oral production which comprises individual sounds or phonemes, words, clauses, or sentences that are generated by a student. This type of production was recorded and transcribed for evaluation. The child was familiarized with the material (picture story). The experimenter sat near the participant and presented pictures one by one, in the same order as occurring in the story.

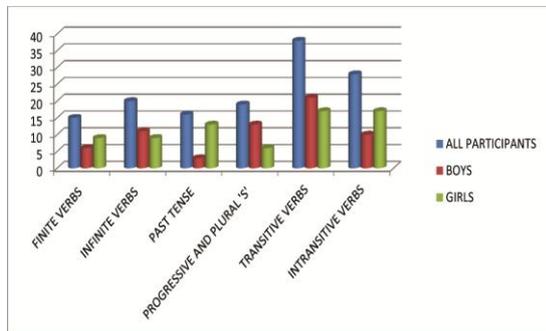
Then all the pictures were displayed in front of the participant so that it became easier for the participants to make connection and narrate the story. 'The Thirsty Crow' in pictures was administered as the stimulus and clear instructions were given to the participants by the experimenter (researcher) that the event in the story had already happened and that the participant must narrate to him (researcher) 'what had happened' in the story. The narration was not bound by time and each participant was given ample time to narrate the story. The session took roughly 50 minutes. The story (production) were recorded and later transcribed. The participant responses were analysed for the use of inflectional morphology indicative of past reference to time.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE 1: AVERAGE MEAN

LANGUAGE COMPONENT	ALL PARTICIPANTS	BOYS	GIRLS
Number of words	46.87	44.75	49
Number of morphemes	78.12	49.25	107
Number of utterances	13.665	10	17.33

The results yielded a wide range in the length of the narratives produced by the participants as measured by the number of words, morphemes and utterances. The number of words ranges from 33 to 161 and averaged 46.87; the number of morphemes ranged from 33 to 178 and averaged 78.12; the number of utterance ranged from 7 to 34 and averaged 13.66. Boys have a word count of 44.75, morphemes stands at 49.25 and of utterance is 10. The average scores clearly show that the oral production of girls is better in all the three components of language and there score are 49 for word count, 107 for morpheme count and 17.33 for the number of utterance. Their morpheme count is more than twice that of the boys and that of utterance is 22% higher.

**Fig 1. Graph showing the frequency distribution**


To consider the order of acquisition by Brown and simultaneously look and Dulay and Burt morpheme acquisition order in L2 children, the study shows that the children are using both finite and infinite verbs, the present progressive form and the plural 's' form. This is in accordance with findings by both Brown, and Dulay and Burt, and hence proves the hypothesis that the order of acquisition is comparable to that of Browns study. The production if the participants clearly exhibit the use of present progressive which Brown says is acquired first and then the use of plural form followed by past irregular , possessive, article and then the past irregular. However, the percentage of irregular past tense is higher than that of regular past which is a deviation from the assumptions of the study. This could be the result of the input and the exposure to the regular and irregular forms of the verbs in the children's immediate environment.

The data shows that the use of infinite verbs used 20 times is higher than the finite verbs which are used a total of 15 times. Girls use finite and infinite verbs the same number of times i.e 9 times whereas boys use infinite verbs 11 times compared to finite verbs used 7 times. Transitive verbs are used 38 times by all the participants, which is higher than the use of intransitive verbs which is only used 28 times. the use of pat tense by all the participants is at 16 which is lesser than the use of present progressive and plural form at 19, even when the test was conducted in obligatory context and clear instructions were given to narrate the the story as an even that had already occurred. However, the use of past is more than twice the use of present progressive among girls which is at 13 and 6

respectively. This shows that there is a better understanding of tense in girls than boys.

A look at the percentage distribution of the same shows that all the participants put together the use of finite verbs is 42.85% and that of infinite verbs is of 57.14%. Boys and girls percentage score are 35.29% finite, 64.70% infinite and 50% finite, 50% infinite for girls respectively. The percentage distribution in the use of transitive and intransitive verbs is also equal whereas in boys 67.74% of transitive verbs and 32.25% of intransitive verbs are used. Overall, the distribution is 57.57% for transitive and 47.42% for intransitive.

About 45.71% verbs used are in past tense and the remaining 54.28% use verb in their present progressive form or their plural form. It is interesting to note that there are two instances of overregularization. Both errors done by two different female participants where one uses the -ed form as a suffix in 'saw' to denote past tense and uses 'sawed' instead of just 'saw' and the other uses 'threwed' in place of 'threw'. The overall use of irregular past tense form employed in the production is around 11 times which constitutes to around 73.33% of the total number of past tense used and the remaining 26.67% is used is as regular past tense.

**TABLE 2: FINITE VS INFINITE VERBS USED.**

DISTRIBUTION IN PERCENTAGE	ALL PARTICIPANTS	BOYS	GIRLS
FINITE	42.85%	35.29%	50%
INFINITE	57.14%	64.70%	50%

**TABLE 3: TRANSITIVE VS INTRANSITIVE VERBS USED**

DISTRIBUTION IN PERCENTAGE	ALL PARTICIPANTS	BOYS	GIRLS
TRANSITIVE VERBS	57.57%	67.74%	50%
INTRANSITIVE VERBS	42.42%	32.25%	50%

**TABLE 4: PAST TENSE MARKER VS PROGRESSIVE AND PLURAL 'S'**

DISTRIBUTION IN PERCENTAGE	ALL PARTICIPANTS	BOYS	GIRLS
PAST TENSE	45.71%	23.52%	66.66%
PROGRESSIVE AND PLURAL 'S'	54.28%	76.47%	33.33%

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### CONCLUSION

The aim of this present study was to ascertain if the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes was in accordance with L1 studies by Brown and L2 studies by Dulay and Burt . The study proves that there exists an order of acquisition in children and this is true across languages, irrespective of what the L1 is. The fact that 'and' being the only prominent discourse marker being used shows that the learner is not equipped with using discourse markers. These findings thus support the fundamental assumptions made by both the paradigms under study and are consistent with prior research and adds to already existing research in the area.

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