

ASPECT VARIATION IN NARRATIVE: A DISCOURSE APPROACH

María del Mar Rivas Carmona
Universidad de Sevilla

The aim of this paper is to show how the choice of verbal aspect may not just be a matter of location in time but also a sign of the addresser's intentions to highlight different elements of the message. The role of the addressee is to establish temporal assumptions and draw the necessary inferences in order to interpret the text. In the case of literary texts, writers make use of aspect variation in order to foreground particular events and to involve or detach the readers with respect to them. Thus, writers take advantage of these camera-angle possibilities and we may find instances where sentences containing the progressive or imperfective aspect convey events as if from within a character's mind or as if the reader were close to the scene, scrutinizing all the details. We will illustrate this with some excerpts from novels by Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, Margaret Drabble and Doris Lessing, in which temporal inferencing plays a vital role when distinguishing subjective fragments of thought-representation from objective fragments of narration.

1. Introduction

The relationship between temporal deixis, more specifically, between tense and aspect choice, and overall discourse constraints has recently drawn the attention of discourse analysts. The examination of different discourse types has led them, on the one hand, to state correlations between particular discourse types and choices of tense and aspect and, on the other, to interpret tense and aspect from an interactive perspective, that is, focusing on the standpoint of the addresser and his/her intentions in highlighting certain segments of the message.

In their study of data beyond the sentence and the analysis of the

cohesive elements which contribute to a coherent understanding of texts¹, many analysts have reinterpreted the significance of grammatical categories such as reference, ellipsis and substitution or conjunction². Temporal deixis has not been an exception:

[...]if things such as demonstratives and pronouns appear in an enhanced light when we consider language beyond the sentence, what of the rest of the stock-in-trade of grammar teaching? What, for example, of verb and tense aspect? Can these too be rethought and approached with a different emphasis? (McCarthy & Carter, 1994:94)

W. Zydatis (1986) or M. Swan & C. Walter (1990), among others, studied the textual functions of temporal linking; they focused on the use of the present perfect in news events and observed how the present perfect is very frequently chosen so as to highlight the topicalising sentence, whereas the past simple is used to describe further details: “A British firm *has landed* a huge shipping contract with Brazil. The deal *was signed* at a meeting today in London”.

Tense and aspect choices have also been related to discourse segments in academic writing, with a predominance of the present perfect in the ‘introduction’ section, for instance, and in more ordinary contexts, such as the telling of stories or jokes (see Schiffrin 1981). She noted how the speaker switched from the past to the present and from the historical present tense to continuous aspect to emphasize particular stages in the narrative. This is a clear interpersonal device as it involves the addressee in a direct

¹ Cohesive ties (formal links that establish meaning relations between elements that connect the sentences in the text) are tools that help us identify a stretch of language as a unified whole. Nevertheless, texts can be coherent without being cohesive, in other words, formal links are not enough, because we can *infer* the function of what is said without them, as in:

-The kid hasn't arrived yet.
-Don't worry.

² Formal links as cohesive devices have been analysed among others by Brown y Yule 1983; Halliday y Hasan 1976, 1985; Halliday 1985; 1994; McCarthy 1991; Martin 1992; McCarthy y Carter 1994.

way. Let us illustrate this shift to the present continuous for emphatic purposes in the recounting of a ghost story:

- A: Not all that long since, perhaps ten years ago, this friend of mine, her son was in hospital, and he'd had a serious accident and he was unconscious for a long time... anyway, she went to see him one day and she said 'Has anybody been to see you?', and he says 'No, but a right nice young lady came to see me,' he said, 'she was lovely, she stood at the foot of my bed, you know, she. . . had a little word with me.' Well eventually he came home, and they'd a lot of the family in the house, and Emma, this friend of mine, brought these photographs out, of the family through the years, and, passing them round, and **he's looking at them** and he said 'Oh! That's that young lady that came to see me when I was in bed.' She'd died when he was born . . . so.
- B: Good God.
- A: He'd never seen her.
- B: No . . . heavens. (In McCarthy 1991:61)

From this extract it can be deduced that the choice of tense and aspect is not just a matter of precise location in time but also a sign of the speaker/writer's intentions to foreground certain elements:

The tenses and aspects do not seem so much strictly bound to time as to issues such as the sender's purpose, the focus on different elements of the message, and the projection of a shared framework within which the receiver will understand the message. (McCarthy 1991:62)

The role of the hearer/reader will be to interpret these sentences by establishing temporal assumptions/presuppositions and capturing inferences based on tense and aspect choice. Thus, temporal inference is vital in a discourse/ pragmatic approach to a text.

This becomes particularly so when reading narrative, as the complexity of literary texts makes them less regular or predictable with respect to tense and aspect choice. The writer is free to highlight the events and segment the text into temporal frameworks, involving or 'detaching' the reader according to his/her purposes. Twentieth-century narrative, for

example, can be characterized by a predominance of the expression of consciousness and by the presentation of information from different perspectives. The aim of the present paper is to show how the choice of verbal aspect may prove to be a relevant factor in determining the point of view chosen by a writer of fiction, that is, in determining whether the reader is presented with a character's point of view (a representation of speech or thought), or the narrator's viewing position (narration). Also, we have endeavoured here to present text extracts from different novels in which the progressive aspect helps us to ascribe them not to the narrator, but to the standpoint of a character, thus as part of the 'subjective material'³. As Susan Erlich stated: "[in particular contexts] sentences containing progressive aspect convey events from a character's point of view" (1990:81).

2. Aspect and the presentation of information

According to Talmy Givón, aspect in English, as elsewhere, encompasses a group of heterogeneous semantic and *pragmatic* categories:

Some involve *temporal* properties of the event, such as **boundedness**, **sequentiality** or **temporal gapping**. Others involve purely pragmatic notions such as **relevance**. Other yet involve more subtle facets of the **perspective** taken by the speaker. (1993:152)⁴

As far as temporal properties are concerned, if 'tense' is a deictic category which locates a situation in time, 'aspect' has to do with "the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (Comrie, 1976:3). To put it simply, if tense is concerned with 'situation-external time', aspect is concerned with 'situation-internal time':

³ The information presented from the narrator's or a character's point of view has been named in different ways. For instance, Fillmore (1981): 'thought-representing portions' vs. 'descriptive portions'; Dry (1977): 'thought-representation' vs. 'exposition'; Banfield (1982): 'reported speech or thought' vs. 'narration' or Reinhart (1984) et al.: 'background material' vs. 'foreground material'.

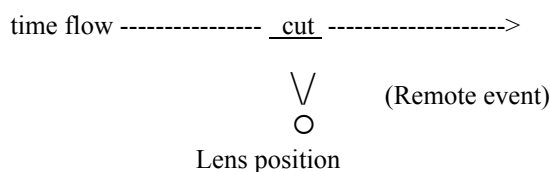
⁴ Emphasis by the writer.

She came (past) vs. *She comes* (present)
(different tense)

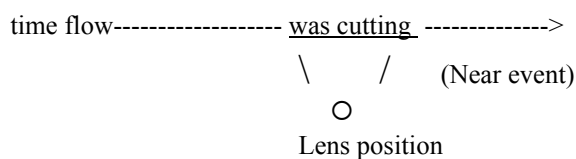
She came (simple/perfective) vs. *She was coming*
(progressive/imperfective)
(different aspect)

According to Givón (1993:153), the progressive or imperfective aspect converts a temporally compact, bounded or terminated event into a temporally diffuse, unbounded, ongoing process (this is evident if we compare ‘she came’ and ‘she was coming’). We should point out that the event is not diffuse in itself but that, it is presented in the middle of it – happening, and that, from the speaker/writer’s perspective, temporal boundaries are disregarded:

Simple / bounded (narrow lens-angle) perspective:



Progressive / unbounded (wide lens-angle) perspective:



What seems relevant is that, in contrast to the simple or narrow-angle perspective, events described in the progressive form are presented as if the observer were situated right at the scene, scrutinizing all the details close at hand.

Writers take advantage of these camera-angle possibilities and, as

was noted previously, many instances can be found where sentences containing the progressive aspect convey events as if from the inside of a character's mind, that is, from a character's viewpoint, in contrast to the objective perspective of the narrator.

3. Aspect and thought-representation in fiction

In the introductory lines of *The Summer before the Dark* by Doris Lessing, the reader has access to the protagonist's inner thoughts, which are introduced with the progressive aspect:

A woman stood on her back doorstep, arms folded, *waiting*. *Thinking?* She would not have said so. She *was trying* to catch hold of something...; for some time she *had been 'trying on'* ideas... She *was letting* words and phrases slide around her tongue. *Ah yes, first love!* . . . *Growing up is bound to be painful!* . . . *Marriage is a compromise.* . . . A woman stood on her back doorstep, arms folded, waiting for a kettle to boil. (Lessing, 1973:5)

The protagonist, Kate Brown, is presented and located ("she stood") at the very beginning of the narration and the tense selected is the past simple, in accordance with the conventions of the genre. The camera-angle is narrow and remote as in a background or general shot in a film, until the progressive form "waiting" opens up a path to her mental process and the lens closes up on her, revealing her thoughts: "*Thinking?* . . . She *was trying* to catch hold of something...". This leads smoothly to a direct presentation of her thoughts in the present tense without any projecting clause ("Ah yes, first love...", etc.). When the perfective reappears, the objective standpoint of the narrator returns with it: "A woman stood on her back doorstep..."⁵.

Had we found the 'perfective' or 'simple' forms in the same passage, our perceptions as readers would have changed, and the situation would have been looked at from the outside, as a complete event:

⁵ Teun van Dijk (1982) includes paragraph indentation in written discourse as one of the typical phenomena of the change of discursal unit. In this case, the episodes of narration and the episodes of thought-representation belong to different paragraphs, though sometimes demarcation is not so easily perceived.

(*) She *tried* to catch hold of something; for some time she *had 'tried on'* ideas... She *let* words and phrases slide around her tongue...

Let us illustrate our point with another passage from the same novel:

Perhaps she had been insensitive? Perhaps both Tim and Eileen had not enjoyed the day's small contrivings...; they had been pretending out of social feeling?

The woman unfolded her arms, took a couple of steps towards the absurd contraption in the middle of her gravel path, pushed some more twigs under the kettle... and listened: *was* the note of the kettle's singing *changing* at all? She thought it was. If there *was going to* be a power-cut *tomorrow*, then it would be sensible to get a camper's stove... Perhaps Tim and Eileen were right... (p.6)

This excerpt exemplifies the use of free indirect thought: the questions and exclamations are retained in a direct form, the deictic adverbs of time are related to the moment of narration "there was going to be a power-cut *tomorrow*", and the progressive is used in a clause containing projected thought with no introductory projecting clause: "was the note of the kettle's singing *changing* at all?". There is a sharp contrast between this and the sudden incursion by the narrator into the past simple: "The woman unfolded her arms... and listened". The use of the perfective in the thought-representing episode could have led us to an interpretation of the passage from a more remote and objective perspective:

(*)... and (she) listened if the note of the kettle *had changed* at all. She thought it had. She thought that in case there *would be* a power-cut *the following day*, then it would be sensible to get a camper's stove...

The use of the progressive form is also a frequent device for thought-representation in Virginia Woolf. In *To the Lighthouse* it is a fundamental vehicle for approaching Mrs Ramsay's, Lily Briscoe's or Mr

Tansley's thoughts. For instance, the use of the progressive in the following excerpt helps readers interpret these lines as being part of Mr Tansley's thoughts and not as an objective description by the narrator:

'Oh, Mr Tansley', [Lily Briscoe] said, 'do take me to the Lighthouse with you. I should so love it.'

She *was telling* lies he could see. She *was saying* what she didn't mean to annoy him, for some reason. She *was laughing at him*. . . He felt very rough and isolated and lonely. He knew that she *was trying* to tease him for some reason; she didn't want to go to the Lighthouse with him; she despised him: so did Prue Ramsay; so did they all. But he *was not going to* be made a fool of by women... (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, (1927) 1964:99-100 (1927))

This paragraph is a clear example of an episode of thought-representation. The projecting clauses "he could see [that]...", "he knew that..." introduce his thoughts. And, even when not introduced by these mental processes, we perceive sentences such as "She was saying what she didn't mean..." or "She was laughing at him..." as though they were projected from his subjective perspective.

In fact, the aspectual form can guide us in our interpretation of sentences which are not cohesively or syntactically related to an episode of thought-representation and yet are perceived as being 'implicitly coherent'⁶ within this discourse unit. For instance, in the same novel, we witness Mr Bankes' thought-stream:

...Conscious of his treachery, conscious of her wish to talk about something more intimate, yet out of mood for it at present, he felt come over him the disagreeableness of life, sitting there, waiting. *Perhaps* the others *were saying* something interesting? *What were they saying?*

That the fishing season was bad; that the men were emigrating. They *were talking* about wages and unemployment. The young man *was abusing* the government... Lily *was listening*; Mrs

⁶ Reinhart's term.

Ramsay was *listening*; they were all *listening*. (*To the Lighthouse*, (1927) 1964:108)

The evaluative word “perhaps” (“Perhaps the others were saying something interesting?”) is hardly compatible with an omniscient narrator, but rather with one who is completely identified with the character. The perspective in this case is again subjective. Besides, the sentence would become pragmatically odd if it appeared with the perfective aspect (*“Perhaps the others said something interesting.”).

Apparently incohesive sentences may also prove to be coherent, not just because of their semantic content but, above all, because of their use of the imperfective aspect. For example, in the following excerpt from *Mrs Dalloway*, the last sentence is interpreted as part of the projection of the character’s thoughts because of the progressive aspect, as it lacks any other formal link with the rest of the passage:

But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him... She felt glad that he had done it... *The clock was striking*. (Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, (1925) 1964:206)

In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Jean Rhys presents us with Julia Martin’s life. If we compare the following two dialogues between the protagonist, Julia, and her sister, the relevance of the use of the progressive in certain contexts will become apparent:

Julia sat silently by the fire. She looked ill. Norah thought she had lost her expression, but Norah was too busy to think about that. She came in to ask: ‘Look here, Julia, do you think we ought to have the choir?’
‘No,’ said Julia. ‘Why?’
Norah said: ‘I think she’d have liked it.’
‘Oh, well, have it then, have it.’
‘It’s that I have so little ready money,’ said Norah unhappily.
(1930) 1971:92)

[Julia] shut her eyes on the twilight of the room and began to

M Rivas Carmona

mutter:

Eternal rest give unto her, O Lord.
Let perpetual light shine upon her.

Her lips were dry... she went on praying.

Norah was whispering: 'Would you like something to eat?'

'No.'...

Norah stood up and went and spoke ... to the nurse. She was saying: 'Go and have something to eat -or some tea,' and the nurse was answering: 'No, my dear, no.'

But after that Julia stopped praying... (p.88)

In the first dialogue, the sentences that introduce the direct speech of the interlocutors are in the past simple. This provides an objective perspective of the conversational event. In the second passage, on the other hand, the interaction between both sisters and between Julia's sister and the nurse run parallel to another action, Julia's praying. The progressive aspect helps us to interpret these words as if heard through Julia's ears while praying.

At the beginning of the novel, Julia is about to leave a room at a hotel and she is thinking about her future. The progressive aspect provides a broad lens-angle and close perspective of some events which we also feel to be perceived through her ears:

...she started to walk up and down the room with the palms of her hands tightly together. ...

As she put on her hat she stared at herself in the looking-glass. She told herself: 'I must get some new clothes. That's the first thing to do.' And she longed for someone to whom she might say: 'I don't look so bad, do I?...' . . .

Now the gramophone next door began to play again. . . . People were laughing, talking, pushing. Crowds of people were elbowing each other along a street, going to a fair. And you heard the tramp of feet and the noise of the fair coming nearer; and the people calling... (p.15)

In *Jerusalem the Golden* by Margaret Drabble, we find other

instances of the use of the progressive to represent the character's inner perceptions:

Clara seeing [a portrait], understood entirely, as she had never understood before, why one should wish to perpetuate such things...

She liked the look of Gabriel. She looked, anxiously, in search of his adult image... but the only revealing picture was one ... at the christening of Magnus's first child. Gabriel *was*, in fact, *holding* the baby: a baby elaborately draped in the ancient lace robe of the Denhams'... Candida had herself been christened in it... Gabriel *was not looking at* the camera, but at the child, and he *was smiling*. (1967:110-111)

In these lines, the protagonist, Clara Maugham, is looking at the Denhams' family album. The progressive aspect marks the difference between what is in and not in the pictures. The reader interprets or, rather, infers that sentences such as "Gabriel was holding the baby" or "Gabriel was smiling" refer to what he is doing in the pictures as seen through Clara's eyes.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of different text excerpts from *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* by Jean Rhys, *Jerusalem the Golden* by Margaret Drabble and *The Summer before the Dark* by Doris Lessing provides evidence supporting an interpretation of the choice of verbal aspect from an interactive perspective, that is, on the one hand, focusing on the writers' intentions to highlight particular events (by establishing temporal frameworks involving or detaching the readers); on the other, focusing on the readers' ability to establish temporal assumptions and making the right inferences by basing them on aspect choice.

In the particular passages which have been examined, an interpretation has been arrived at whereby the sentences containing the progressive or imperfective aspect are presented from a character's subjective perspective, closely scrutinized by the reader, as opposed to those

in the simple or perfective which diminish the lens-angle and make readers perceive the events as being remote or objective.

Bibliographical references

- Banfield, A. 1982. *Unspeakable sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Brown, G. & Yule, G. 1983. *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: C.U.P.
- Comrie, B. 1976 (1993). *Aspect*. Cambridge: C.U.P.
- Dijk, T. van. 1982. "Episodes as units of discourse analysis" in D. Tannen (ed.) *Analyzing Discourse: Text and Talk*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Drabble, M. 1967. *Jerusalem the Golden*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Dry, H. 1977. "Syntax and point of view in Jane Austen's *Emma*". *Studies in Romanticism* 16: 87-99.
- Erich, S. 1990. *Point of View*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Fillmore, C. 1981. "Pragmatics and the description of discourse" in P. Cole (ed.) *Radical Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press.
- Givón, T. 1993. *English Grammar: A Function-based Introduction*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Halliday, M.A.K. 1985. (1994) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K. & Hasan, R. 1976. *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Halliday, M.A.K. & Hasan, R. 1985. *Language, context and text*. Oxford: O.U.P.
- Lessing, D. 1973. *The Summer before the Dark*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Martin, J.R. 1992. *English Text*. Philadelphia/Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- McCarthy, M. 1991. *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: C.U.P.
- McCarthy, M. & Carter, R. 1994. *Language as Discourse*. London:

Longman.

- Reinhart, T. 1984. "Principles of gestalt perception in the temporal organization of narrative texts". *Language* 22: 779-809.
- Rhys, J. (1930) 1971. *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Schiffirin, D. 1981. "Tense variation in narrative". *Language* 57 (1): 45-62.
- Swan, M. & Walter, C. 1990. *The New Cambridge English Course: Book 2*. Cambridge: C.U.P.
- Woolf, V. (1925) 1964. *Mrs Dalloway*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Woolf, V. (1927) 1964. *To the Lighthouse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Zydatiss, W. 1986. "Grammatical categories and their text functions" in G. Leitner (ed.) *The English Reference Grammar: Language and Linguistics, Writers and Readers*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyes.