### Grammatical Development of Past Tense in Learners Spanish as L2: Oral and Written Productions

#### Lilia Delfina Ruiz-Debbe

State University of New York, at Stony Brook

#### 1. Introduction

There has been an increasing interest in the research of tense and aspect in second-language learners (L2). Recent work on the development of Temporality in interlanguage examines the meaning and functions of emerging verb morphology (e.g., Andersen 1986, 1991; Andersen and Shirai 1994; Bardovi-Harling 1992, 1994, 1995, 2000; Dietrich,, Klein and Noyau, 1995; Giacolone Ramat, 1990, 2002; Liskin-Gasparro 1996, 2000; Salaberry 2000, Salaberry and Shirai 2002).

In the acquisition of past tense in learners of Spanish as Second Language, the grammatical development is part of a subsystem in the interlanguage grammar. We can assume that the temporal categories of interlanguage are the same as the target language. The speaker's system has reference to the grammatical categories of the target language in a tutored context.

The hypothesis of the interlanguage is based in the construct of a learner language, or interlanguage (IL) (Selinker 1972), which is a system of rules constructed by the learner for the purpose of speaking and understanding utterances in the Target Language (TL). For some researchers of Second Language Acquisition, such systems appear like the intermediate grammars constructed by children during the process of first language acquisition, even-though there are, of course, fundamental differences.

To achieve the pedagogical objectives it is important to understand the contrast between English-Spanish in the preterit-imperfect (PRET/IMP) aspectual distinction. Understanding the stages of development of markers of temporality may inform instructional sequences. In the case of tense/aspect it is important to understand how semantic and pragmatics distinctions are represented.

The acquisition of the Preterit/Imperfect contrast is very difficult for English speakers learning Spanish because it is not represented by the single tense of English. In some cases, learners can relay meanings of the Imperfect with *used to/would*; this is one of the means of conveying aspectual distinctions in past tense English. Another aspectual distinction in past tense English is the use of the Progressive form.

The focus of the study reported in this paper is the perfective-imperfective aspect in Spanish. The terminology, "perfective" versus "imperfective" is taken from Comrie (1976) and is meant to be universal terminology. "Perfective" aspect treats a situation or event as a self-contained whole. The verb form used in Spanish is called Preterit in Spanish grammars. "Imperfective" aspect makes explicit reference to the internal temporal structure of the situation viewing a situation form within" Comrie (1976:24).

An important and relevant study in the Spanish development of temporal-aspectual system in interlanguage, has been done by Andersen. There are two concepts related to the aspect: Grammatical Aspect and Inherent Lexical Aspect. The Grammatical Aspect refers basically to aspectual distinctions which are obligatorily encoded to past time, usually an auxiliary or inflection. On the other hand, Inherent Lexical Aspect is not explicitly encoded in morphology; it is an inherent part of the word or construction that expresses the situation or action.

In the following examples from Andersen (1991:308), it is possible to see the distinction between perfective versus imperfective, in Spanish-English contrast.

(1) a. Present: Nadie **baila** tan bien como él Nobody dances as well as he (does).

b. Preterit: Nadie **bailó** tan bien como él. (perfective) Nobody danced as well as he (did).

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c. Imperfect: Nadie **bailaba** tan bien como él. (Imperfective) "Nobody danced as well as he (did).

The distinction between (1b) and (1c) will become apparent shortly. The preterit *bailó* can be paraphrased as:

(2) bailó: nobody danced as well as he did in the dance contest we just saw.

In this case, *bailó* refers to an event that is viewed as a whole, that had just finished. *Bailaba* could have two senses (3) and (4)

(3) bailaba: Nobody danced as well as he did when we are young.

The meaning is nobody knew how to , was capable of dancing like that Or:

(4) bailaba: Nobody danced as well as he did while everyone's eyes were fixed on him.

The sentences (3) and (4) represent two different senses to capture the internal movement as it is happening.

According to Comrie (1976:3), when referring to events o situations, speakers indicate localization in time and they also convey aspectual information "Aspect refers to the different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation"

(Aspect as the contrast of internal compositionality versus totality of the event). This bring us back to the problem in the case of English speakers learning Spanish, they need to know the semantic value of aspectual contrast and get knowledge about the mark in verbal morphology endings (cf. Andersen 1991; Salaberry 2000; Smith, 1991).

#### 2. Research questions and hypotheses

This paper surveys the development of verbal morphology by analyzing data from English speakers learning (L2) Spanish in a classroom setting.

The questions that guided the present study are:

- i. How do learners of Spanish as L2 get into the Past Tense System initially?
- ii. What stages they go through, and how they arrive a this perfective: imperfective system using Preterit and Imperfect Spanish forms?
- iii. How does instruction affect the movement from one stage to the next?

#### Hypothesis:

This research will consider the line of investigation of "Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis" this hypothesis predicts "learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground from background in narratives" (Bardovi-Harling, 1994:43)

- . Hypothesis 1: The analysis of interlanguage narrative structure shows that the distribution of PRET/IMP will tend to be: the Past Tense on the foreground and Imperfect tense on the background.
- Hypothesis 2: The presence of the Textual Organizers (TO) on the narrative will facilitate the "tense-aspect' marking. Learners will be able to build functional opposition between Preterit versus Imperfect, when they use TO.

#### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Population

There were four different groups who participated in the cross-sectional study. Three of them were Spanish as second language learners and one group of native Spanish speakers.

Group I	Group II	Group III	Group IV
Basic Level	Intermediate Level	Native Spanish	Advanced Learners
		Speakers	
Spn 112	Spn 211	Spn 310	Spn 465
Four classes	Two classes	One class	One class
47 Written texts	15 Written texts	8 Written texts	19 Written texts
37 Oral texts	15 Oral texts	6 Oral texts	15 Oral texts

Table #1 Distribution of subjects, levels, and number of oral and written texts.

#### 3.2 Experimental design of the production

A cross-sectional study of oral and written narratives from learners of Spanish as a Second Language was elicited by means of a film retell task. An 11 minutes Silent film "What's Pig," of Peter Lord was used. The story is characterized by a series of sequential actions, ""foreground" as well as simultaneous actions and changes of scene, "background'.

The film tells the story of two twin brothers, and starts showing how one of them is kidnapped and left alone in the woods. After that, the segments are developed in four scenes: (1) the twins grow up in very different ways, one becomes a king and the other is a poor peasant that lives with his friend, the pig, that took care of him. (2) The kingdom had a war and the peasant took part of the battle to save the King. (3) At the time of the last battle, both twins, met and their mother realizes that they are twins. (4) Finally, both of them with the mother and the pig are together in the poor house of the peasant after the king was lost the kingdom.

#### 3.3 Production Task

Each subject was asked to retell the story of the film in Oral and Written narratives in the past tense. For groups I to III, the instructions were given in Spanish and English, to make sure that the students understood the task correctly. In the group IV, the instruction was only in Spanish.

In the first part of the task, the subjects watched the movie narrative, and wrote a text retelling the story, they then sent the written text to the author by e-mail.

In the second part of the task, the students were asked to narrate the same story orally, while they were recorded with a tape recorder at the Language Laboratory. The researcher emphasized several times that the subjects should generate a narration in Past Tense.

The methodology was different in each group.

- Group I: The film was shown twice. Learners were exposed for first time to the contrast PRET/IMP. More care was invested in the monitoring and planning of the elicitation of data.
- . Group II: The film was shown twice. The study was done while learners worked on IMP/PRET. Minimal monitoring.
- . Group III and IV: Film was shown once. Planning and monitoring was minimized.

#### 4. Analysis of results and discussion

#### 4.1 Data analysis

All texts were transcribed to a computer. Verbs, textual organizer and others structures were marked with specials codes on all texts. The identification and counting was done with PERL scripts. The results were stored on a database for later analysis. The Results reported in this paper are based on the first pass of counting, text characterization, and identification of some patterns.

#### 4.2 The narrative and the temporalit.

All texts, written and oral, have the same order of facts in the reconstruction of the story. This results is related with the narrative understood as a story line. It was systematic that all texts starting with the beginner learners through the intermediate and the advanced learners, as well as the native Spanish speakers had the same order of chronological facts. This characteristic of learner narrative is widely recognized as chronological order in narration (Meisel, 1987), the principle of natural order (PNO; Klein, 1986), and the principle of chronological order (von Stutterheim &Klein, 1987). In addition to this chronological order, our data reveals that the earliest stage of temporal expression is not the systematic use of tense-aspect morphology. It suggests that the learning is based more on the attention to the message and after on the form.

#### 4.3 Analysis of the verb frequencies

Figure 1 refers to all verbs elements, found in the data. The linguistic analysis and quantification of the verbs frequencies in all texts, orals and written, reveal that the highest frequency of verbs tenses was:

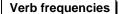
#### PRETERIT > IMPERFECT> PRESENT

With the highest frequency of PRET in Group III and Group IV. The first group correspond to the native speakers and the group IV to the advanced learners. The lowest frequencies appear in groups II and I. This results are correlated to the development of the past tense according the levels of proficiency.

An additional criterion for identifying those features, which indicate the corrected verb in obligatory context Perfective versus Imperfective, was analyzed in the data. The results, as natural sequence of the verb frequencies, is shown in figure 2. As can be seen, there is a reverse order in the analysis of corrected verb:

#### PRESENT > IMPERFECT > PRETERIT

In addition, the presence of present tense was strong in groups II, and I, followed by IV and III. In the data obtained the corrected verbs were more frequent in the Basic and Intermediate Levels of Spanish learners, and it was success in the variety of advanced learners Spanish. We can suppose with this results that the present tense was the marked form instead of the past tense. Others forms that were corrected belong to the present and past participles in the group II and I. This verbal elements could be the indication of encoding the tense and aspect in Spanish in the earlier stages of development.



#### **Corrected Verb frequencies**

20

25

30

Verb ID

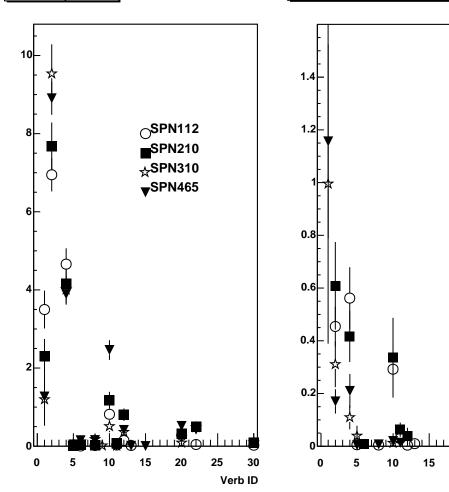


Figure 1a Number of verbs normalized to the total number of words in each text. 1b Fraction of verbs that were corrected. Verb ID is listed in appendix A.

#### 4.4 Findings between oral and written text.

In this cross-sectional studies, the difference between oral and written data was analyzed in all groups. The production of 89 written and 73 oral narratives constitute the corpus of this work. There are some researchers that claim no effects between written and oral narratives (Bardovi-Harling, 1995), other studies do not show such a correlation (Ellis, 1987); Salaberry, 2000).

The empirical finding following the analysis of Verb frequencies presented in figure 2 shows that group s III and IV present similar characteristics in the use of preterit and imperfect in both text types. The preterit appears more often in the foreground of the story line and, the imperfect in the background. This variable use will be tried in the next part of the paper.

The results from group I reveal a difference between written and oral narratives. It is clear that the preterit tense on the written text appears more often followed by Imperfect and present tense. However, in the oral texts, the Preterit and present are used with similar frequencies followed by the Imperfect. It is possible that learners put more attention to form in the written text, or it is possible that learners are more conscious about the rules of the morphological endings and others lexical devices that it helps them develop additional function of use in context of the preterit versus imperfect tense.

In group II, the intermediate level, the difference between written and oral texts is notable. On the written text the frequency of preterit is stronger than Imperfect, but it is remarkable that the present and progressive tense appear in the narrative. This findings could be a next development of the acquisition of the tense and aspect in Spanish. It seems to be related with the vanishing of the present tense. However, in the oral text. the preterit is the most frequent form and the imperfect and present have very similar frequencies. Other forms appear in the oral narrative of this intermediate level of learners of Spanish, progressives and participle tenses.

At this point, the data supports differences between oral and written narratives in learners of Spanish as L2. With this first result of the analysis, it is possible to provide evidence of an intermediate stage between the development of the preterit versus imperfect.

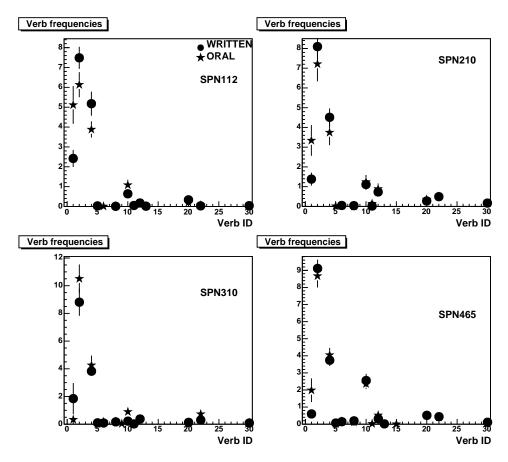


Figure 2 Verb frequencies for oral and written texts from each of the four groups.

#### 4.5 The complexity of the narrative structure

All across the data from the beginners to the advanced learners, and, the native speakers, the question of the structure of narrative is obligatory. In a very transparent sense, the length of the texts marks the differences, this is related to the amount of the words used in the narrative and the type of the structured sequences themselves. Within the scope of this presentation, it may be necessary to narrow the explanation of a development of the structure formation from the data. In a first outlook of the narrative production, oral and written, as shown in the figure (3), the text becomes more complex as the students attend higher-level courses. The average number of marks applied to the texts: verbs, text organizers at the syntactic level (OTS), and the text organizers at the level of the lexical devices

(OTE) per number of paragraphs in the text grows form 2.5 in the Group I (the beginners learners) to 4.5 in the group IV (the advanced learners).

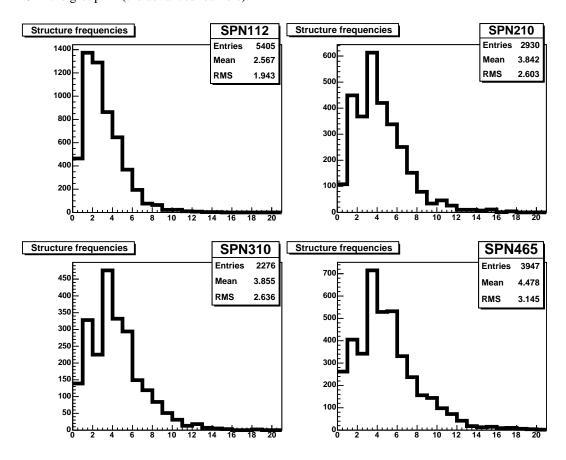


Figure 3 Complexity of texts shown as the average number of structures sequences grow.

Strategies for building the temporal relations

From the data collected for this work, in both oral and written texts, a variety of verbs in the past tense has been identified.

In this basis, a temporal framework was selected to distinguish two sets of past:

- a. The Perfective set: which includes the preterit, pluperfect, present perfect and past participle
- b. *The Imperfective set*: made of the imperfect, the imperfect progressive, Imperfect Subjunctive, present participle.

A method of analysis was deviced that consists in the study of the *location of a verb along the text*. The total number of paragraphs in the text is used to normalize all texts. The text is then divided in ten sections. The horizontal axis shows the verb location in each of the ten sections of the text, and the number of verbs on each section is displayed in the vertical axis.

Figure (4), displays the verb location for *the Perfective set*, the perception of the analysis is the placement of this set appears all through the text. A closer look at the verb constructions, a reliable indication of the number of preterit verb in all groups remains distributed across the story. The highest frequencies in all groups, is related with this set. The results reveals that the series of sequential action, the foreground, seem to be marked in this section. A clear dip is seen at about the first third of the text, followed by a gradual increase till the end of the text. This last feature is not present in group I. It is also remarkable that the data shows a strong correlation with some temporal markers as lexical devices (OTE).

In the same order, following figure (5), the *Imperfective set*, the shows lower frequencies (see also, Van Pattern, 1981; Salaberry, 2000). And a clear anti-correlation with the Perfective set; a maximum of verbs located in the first third of the texts.

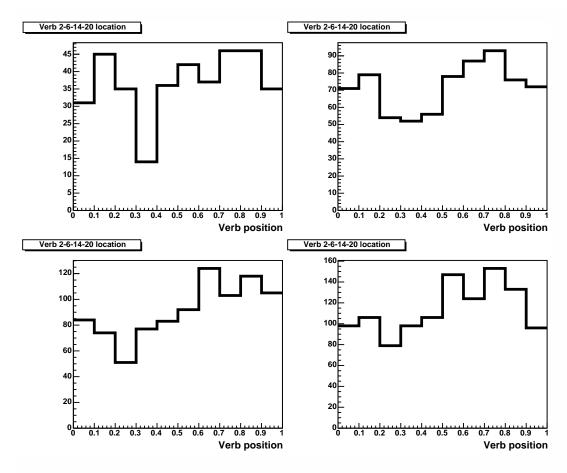


Figure 4 Location of verb from the Perfective set in normalized text.

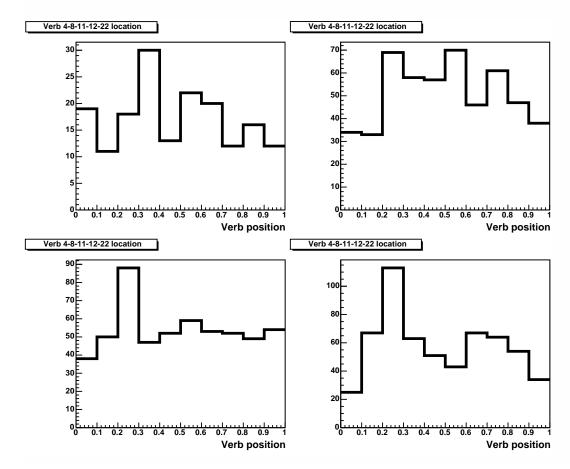


Figure 5 Location of verbs from the Imperfective set.

#### 4.6 Two pattern in the construction of the narrative

The fact that the morphological coding of temporal relations was more developed on two tenses: Preterit and Imperfect, a detailed analysis was done, following the procedure outlined above. According to the definition of narrative "the speaker relates a series of real or fictive events in the order in which they took place"

(Dahl,1984:116). Narrative discourse is comprised of two parts, the foreground and the background. The foreground relates events belonging to the skeletal structure of the discourse (Hopper, 1979), it is the event line, and the background consists of clauses, which set the scene, change the normal sequence of the events. These terms have been used in grammatical analyses such as Hopper (1979) and Givón (1982); they originate from the gestalt psychologists' notion of figure and ground perception.

In figure (6), in contrast with figure (7), the data present a correlation in the structured process mentioned above: foreground and background. Following the viewpoint taken in this paper, the "discourse hypothesis" that claims this two levels of the narrative using preterit or imperfect tenses.

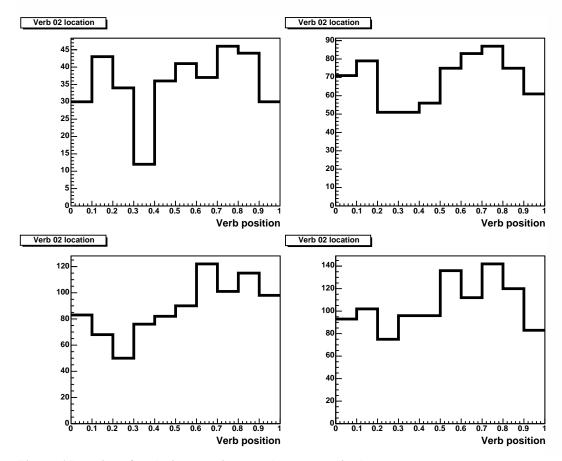


Figure 6 Location of verbs in preterit tense along normalized texts.

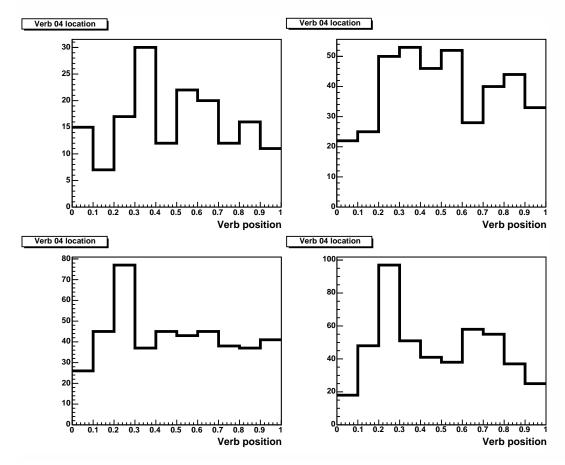


Figure 7 Location of verbs in imperfective tense.

The analysis of the data obtained from the total of 162 narratives, 89 written narratives and 73 oral narratives, reveals that this tendency applies on the contrast with the location on the text PRET/IMP.

At the level of the accuracy scores, the data show lower frequencies in the imperfect, the lowest in the Group I, as expected. However, there is a peak in all groups that appears when the action of the story changes. Within this findings on the interlanguage narrative, the function of the background appears with lacks of sequentiality. According to Noyau (1984, 1990), and Bardovi-Harling, 1992, 1995) and Lafford (1996) a film or story retell task can elicit rich background however, learners tend to narrate the foreground more than background. Tomlin (1984) claims that there may be pressure that leads learners to sacrifice background for foreground.

Following with the production of the overall location of the PRET/IMP tense on the text, the comparison between group III, native speakers and group IV, advanced learners of Spanish as L2, looks similar. It reveals a distribution of the basic pattern of description. For both groups a strong tendency for reporting significant events with strategies of foregrounding use. However, the group of native speakers tend to be more attentive to the overall context of the narrative and the learners of the group IV used more local cues for the selection of aspectual markers of the past tense.

From the results of the Group II, the intermediate level, other phenomenon is founded. The explanation could be that they use distinct strategies in describing significant and non-significant events. Or, it may be correlated with the "intermediate form" as it was called in this paper like an intermediate stage between the development of the preterit versus imperfect. The examination of such

texts should provide a context for the emergence and spread imperfectives, a process that need to be more documented (Ruiz-Debbe,2003b research in process) to the extent this possibility.

#### 4.7 Textual organizer and the tense-aspect marking

The assumption that the presence of the textual organizer (TO) on the narrative will provide evidence of the tense and aspect is seen in figure (8). The distribution of markers seems to reflect a functional organization of the narrative in terms of the foreground and background. According to Givón (1982), the central idea is that the organization of a discourse is reflected in the distribution of certain grammatical markers.

These results are preliminary. The evidence at this stage, shows that there is a correlation between textual organizer, adverbials as temporal expressions. The most pronounced correlation corresponded to that between the imperfect and the temporal adverb "mientras" (while) followed by one with "cuando" (when).

The learners of Spanish as L2 show higher usage as the group of native speakers. It is possible to assume that there is a relation between the learners 'level of proficiency and the decrease for the use of adverbial as lexical devices. It would be interesting to see if the tense-aspect morphology emerges in interlanguage related to the textual organizer as devices to express temporality.

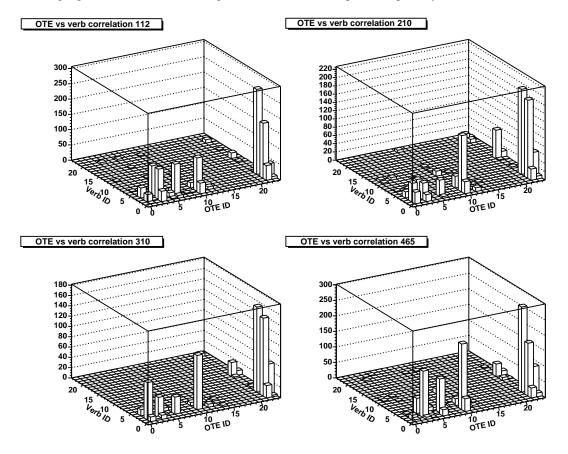


Figure 8 Correlation between verbs and OTE.

#### 5. Summary and some conclusions

Summarizing the findings of these first results, it appears that in the light of the "Discourse Hypothesis" the results give the evidence that the foreground is marked with the preterit and, the background is marked with the imperfect.

The analysis of the verb forms in the early acquisition of the past tense, in learners of Spanish as L2, will tend to use the present tense and infinitives in the obligatory context of Imperfect tense. As part of the interlanguage system learners will develop an intermediate stage using the progressives tenses and the past participles before the acquisition of the imperfect tense form in Spanish.

The use of lexical devices as temporal adverbs (OT), in the first stages of the acquisition of the temporal system, could be considered as intermediate strategy to mark the temporality on the narrative.

The task in the near future will be to deal more adequately with these interlanguage system of the development of the past tense. This paper is a modest step in this direction.

# Appendix A Symbology of analysis of the data.

**Textual organizers at the Structure Level (OTE)** 

Symbol	Expressions	Description
{01{	Yesterday, tomorrow, the day before yesterday, last night, This afternoon, after one hour, etc.	Temporal deictic
{02{	November 20	Chronological date
{03{	The next day, after one day, until one day, the days were passed, Years later, when the sun rises, etc.	Reference to precedent, simultaneous or futures happenings.
{04	A this moment, the first afternoon, a wonderful day, etc.	Expression with a nominal element.
{05{	Once upon a time, there was a time One time etc.	Story narrative expression.
{06{	Suddenly	

{10{	Then, so then, after(wards)	Temporal value
{12{	enseguida, primero, Segundo, etc	Sucession value
{22{	While,	Simultaneous value
{23{	When	Temporal value
{24{	At the same time	
{33{	Finally	
{35{	Before	Temporal value
{36{	usuallly	Temporal value
{37{	siempre	Temporal value
{38{	Every day	Temporal value
{40{	still	Temporal value
{45{	during	Temporal value

#### Verbals Tenses

verbals relises				
#01#	Indicative Present			
#02#	Indicative Preterit			
#03#	Indicative Future			
#04#	Indicative Imperfect			
#05#	Conditional			
#06#	Indicative Pluperfect			
#07#	Subjunctive Present			
#08#	Subjucntive Imperfect			
#09#	Imperative			
#10#	Infinitive			
#11#	Indicative Present progressive			
#12#	Indicative Imperfect progressive			
#13#	Indicative Preterit progressive			
#14#	Indicative Present Perfect			
#15#	Subjunctive Pluperfect			
#20#	Past participles			
#22#	Present participles			
#30#	Passive voice			

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