

**The temporal (re-)construal of experience:**  
**How native speakers of English and advanced Chinese learners**  
**select and interpret simple past/present tenses**

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## **List of Abbreviations**

**EAP: English for Academic Purposes**

**ESL: English as a Second Language**

**EST: English for Science and Technology**

**EFL: English as a Foreign Language**

**HP: Historical Present tense**

**IL: Interlanguage developed by a learner of a second language**

**LRH: Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis**

**L1: First language**

**L2: Second language**

**NS: Native Speakers (of English)**

**NNS: Non-native Speakers of English (referring to L1-Chinese learners of English in this study)**

**SLA: Second Language Acquisition**

## Abstract

This thesis is a pedagogically motivated investigation into problems faced by advanced Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in acquiring the English simple present/past tense distinction. The uses made of these two basic tenses by advanced Chinese learners of English frequently deviate from those of native-speakers, and their interpretations of tense usage also differ systematically from the understandings of native-speakers. Following an empirical investigation comparing advanced Chinese learner usage, acceptability judgements and interpretations with those of native-speakers I attempt to explicate the source(s) of attested differences based on a cross-linguistic comparison of English and Chinese, i.e. a tensed with a tenseless language, within the conceptual frameworks of Cognitive Linguistics and Linguistic Relativity. I argue that these differences hinge on two aspects of event construal: constitutive construal and perspectival construal (Croft and Cruse, 2004). The former entails differences in referential information while the latter is associated with differences in perspectives only.

In an initial phase, the study surveyed naturally occurring native tense usage. In a second phase, I conducted an empirical investigation of a quasi-experimental design that compared advanced Chinese learner usage, acceptability judgements and interpretations with those of native-speakers. The second phase consisted of a survey targeting four aspects of tense usage that have proved problematic for Chinese learners, with follow-up interviews aiming to elicit introspective evidence as well as spontaneous responses. Data were collected from advanced Chinese EFL learners (N=22) and native speakers (N=22) and these were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Statistical analyses revealed significant differences between the two groups in terms of tense choices, acceptability judgements and interpretations. In most cases Chinese learners preferred present tense (except for the historical present tense) whereas English speakers preferred past or both tenses. Qualitative analyses of introspective data also showed consistent differences both in terms of metalinguistic knowledge and the factors taken into account in the decision-making process, providing evidence for potential differences at the conceptual level in relation to grammatical categories of temporal domain.

I argue that my findings support the case for the presence of distinct language-specific perspectives on event construal, suggesting typological influence on specific patterns of conceptualization in support of the linguistic relativity hypothesis. For example, it seems that what is actually being located in relation to the speech time is different for native-speakers and Chinese EFL learners. Certain native-speaker uses of the English past emerge from a language- or culture-specific tendency to focus on the past sphere of the events as they were subjectively experienced; this is associated with episodic memory as opposed to semantic memory, which seems more readily available to Chinese speakers. I argue that these differences are based on distinct conceptualisations of temporality, proposing that speakers of Chinese base their understandings and uses of the English

tenses on a non-egocentric cognitive representation of temporal events which can be described as sequential perspective (Talmy, 2003). This perspective is in fact encoded in the grammar of the Chinese language, where the essentially deictic (or “grounded”) category of tense is absent, and where localized aspectual distinctions (i.e., perfective or imperfective relative to the context, see Halliday & McDonald, 2004) are paramount as the vantage point is in motion.

The study thus provides new perspectives for analysing conceptual transfer in L2 tense acquisition as a promising way of investigating the diversity of human conceptualization. It is hoped that by clearly defining the nature and source(s) of the difficulties experienced by speakers of a tenseless language like Chinese, this research will help contribute to the development of a more effective and targeted approach to improve Chinese EFL learners’ control of English tenses.

## References

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## Statement of Candidate

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled “**The temporal (re-)construal of experience: How native speakers of English and advanced Chinese learners select and interpret simple past/present tenses**” has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

The research presented in this thesis was approved by Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee, reference number: **HE27FEB2009-D06266L&P** on 08/01/2009

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read '徐佳欢' (Xú Jiāhuān), which is the Chinese name of Jiahuan Xu.

**JIAHUAN XU** (41140117)

**14/01/2013**

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 A quick orientation

It is well-known that speakers of Chinese, a tenseless language, encounter considerable difficulty in achieving native-like proficiency in use and comprehension of English tenses. In this thesis, I intend to identify and explore some of the source(s) of the difficulties experienced by advanced Chinese EFL learners in acquiring mastery of (very specifically) the English simple past and present tenses.

My personal awareness of these difficulties arises from the observation that often native speakers' choice of tense does not necessarily accord with the "objective" temporal location of the situations described by the sentences in relation to the here-and-now of the speaker. The crux of my hypothesis, in line with theories of linguistic relativity, is that speakers of Chinese are cognitively disposed to construe and represent events in a different and more literal-logical way from speakers of English. The ancillary assumption is that this disposition is an effect of the grammatical structure of the language they speak. My investigation then involves exploring the role of language-specific perspectives in the temporal conceptualization of events. My findings indicate that Chinese and English speakers have markedly different approaches to event construal. Even very advanced learners display properties of L1 conceptual transfer.

## 1.2 Describing the learning problem

The dichotomy between the past and present simple tenses constitutes the most basic distinction in the "arguably"<sup>1</sup> tripartite tense system of English. However, it is by no means easy for L2 learners to fully master the various uses of these two "simple" tenses, especially for learners whose mother tongue lacks grammatical tense. This is so because the actual uses of these tenses are not as predictable as their names "present" and "past" suggest. Certain English tense uses that

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<sup>1</sup> Some linguists (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2002; Lyons, 1977) hold a narrow view of tense, claiming that there are only two tenses in English, i.e., the past and present (or non-past) tenses. Strictly speaking, English has no "true" future tense because there is no inflected verb form for the future. However, this binary view is objected by others (e.g., Declerck, 1991) on the grounds that tenses can be marked by a free morpheme such as an auxiliary verb as well as by an inflectional morpheme.

come so naturally to native speakers and that are so effortlessly<sup>2</sup> processed by them are often baffling to speakers of tenseless languages such as Chinese. Below are some examples to illustrate the areas that Chinese learners find difficult.

Some past tense uses appear “illogical” or “strange” to Chinese learners. For Chinese learners, the simple past tenses in examples (1.1) and (1.2) are “**illogical**” because the objective situations described by these sentences still hold at the moment of speech. Why, then, are they conceptualized and represented as past events by English native speakers?

(1.1) A: *Did you see the house we just passed by?*

B: *No. What about it?*

A: *It **had** a green and orange roof.* (Riddle, 1986)

(1.2) *My daughter's father **was** Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years.* (Tyler & Evans, 2001)

Sometimes the uses of the English simple past and present tenses seem to be **interchangeable**. In examples (1.3) and (1.4), changing from past to present or vice versa does not seem to substantially affect the propositional content or change the meaning of the utterance in any easily definable way.

(1.3) (a) *I can't recall what Aristotle **says** about moral virtue.*

(b) *I can't recall what Aristotle **said** about moral virtue.*

(1.4) (a) *What you stepped on **was** a nettle.*

(b) *What you stepped on **is** a nettle.*

Example (1.5) below further demonstrates how in two adjacent sentences the author switches from one tense to the other without obvious reason.

(1.5) *Smith (1980) **argued** that Britain was no longer a country in which freedom of speech was seriously maintained. Johnson (1983), though, **argues** that Britain remains a citadel of individual liberty.* (Bastone, 1995)

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes there are hesitations and corrections in using tenses among native English speakers. See Section 1.4.1.

Examples (1.6) - (1.8) below are drawn from natural native-speaker conversations. More specifically, they are from the scripts of three excerpts from an informal chat-type movie review program called “At the Movies” and hosted by David Stratton and Margaret Pomeranz. These examples illustrate the fact that contrary to what is commonly assumed, naturally occurring tense uses in real life often lack consistency.

(1.6) David: Yes, *I **thought** it **was** just maybe a little bit glib at times, as he **walks** past a house called Strawberry Fields.*<sup>3</sup>

(1.7) David: *I **was** very, very moved by the film and I **think it's** very good.*<sup>4</sup>

(1.8) David: *But let's go back to the others. What about ZOMBIELAND?*

Margaret: *ZOMBIELAND **was** the least of them for me. I **liked** PARANORMAL ACTIVITY, because I **think it's** clever.*

....

David: *So, no, I **didn't like** that. So what about scores?*

Margaret: *Well, I would give both DAYBREAKERS and PARANORMAL ACTIVITY four stars. The least of them for me **is** ZOMBIELAND, which I would only give three to.*<sup>5</sup>

These tense uses **vary** confusingly in the eyes of most Chinese learners of English. Such learners often find it hard to comprehend the mental processing that such variability presents, perhaps for the following three reasons:

First, some uses of the past tense appear, again, “illogical” in terms of real time. For example, in (1.6) “...*I **thought** it **was** ...*” and (1.8) “... *I **didn't like** that*”, the past tense is used to talk about David’s opinions despite the fact that the opinions *per se* remain unchanged.

Second, it is very hard for Chinese learners to understand the frequent switching between the past and present tenses that can occur in a very short context. Take (1.6) for example, the switch from the past (*I **thought** it **was** ...*) to the present tense (*as he **walks** past ...*) seem unnecessary to

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s2750508.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s2752119.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s2751084.htm>

Chinese learners. Similar quick shifts can also be found in (1.7) “*I was very moved... I think it’s very good*” and in (1.8) “*I liked PARANORMAL ACTIVITY, because I think it’s clever*”, both in the same direction from past to present tense.

Lastly, it is especially common for confusion to arise in the mind of the Chinese learner when the subject of discussion across clauses is the same referent but the tense of the copular verb varies between past and present. For example in (1.8), the film ZOMBIELAND has been referred to by Margaret at two different points using identical sentence structures “...*the least of them for me...*” Her comments, however, are expressed with different tenses, first in the past tense “*ZOMBIELAND was the least of them for me*” and then in the present tense “*The least of them for me is ZOMBIELAND*”.

Some of these tense uses may find explanations related to the notion of tense conventions in which special consideration is given to overall discourse constraints (especially genre constraints) upon tense usage (e.g., Swales and Feak, 1994). A common explanation regarding example (1.5) is given in terms of conventionalized uses in academic discourse. Regarding “*as he walks past...*” in (1.6), the convention is that play plot should be written in the present tense (as it is reported as repeated events.)

Following this line of research, the dominant view held by many English teachers and discourse scholars is that tense has an important discourse dimension. Tense uses have been associated with multifarious discourse factors, ranging from particular discourse modes (e.g., narrative, report and description, see Smith, 2003) and text types/genres or subgenres (e.g. news reports in newspaper, storytelling, academic texts, etc.) to discourse segments (e.g., the unfolding and signalling of internal textual structure). These discourse factors are highly characterized by conventionalized tense uses, setting them apart from those canonical uses which are determined by purely semantic factors, i.e., objectively measured time. Accordingly, much current instruction in second language acquisition (SLA) emphasizes that learners need to become aware of these “rules” and that they must learn to follow them in practice.

This discourse-related approach to teaching has both its merits and demerits. It does help learners notice the more or less regular correlations between tense choices and particular contexts, so their job in making and understanding tense choices in such contexts can be greatly simplified by following these explicit, discourse-conditioned conventions. However, there remains an unavoidable problem: the “rules” themselves are not always reliable. Language learners often run into “exceptions” and the norms that grammar and writing books seek to provide are not sufficient to explain the choice of tense in every single case.

Summing up, the examples in this section have evidenced that variation in the choice of the English past and present tenses is very common indeed; and as I know from my own experience both as a learner and as a teacher of advanced Chinese learners, such variation is almost inexplicable to Chinese learners of English, and perhaps to other learners with a tenseless L1 language background as well. Even with explicit explanation, typically based on conventionalized usage, it is hard for them to really appreciate the difference between present and past tense uses in the same way that native speakers do. It is a situation very much like trying to describe colour phenomena to people who have been blind from birth.

Finally, I note that there are some interesting and significant language behaviours of these NNSs (non-native speakers) that have not yet to my knowledge been explicitly recognized by either L2 (second language) learners/teachers or SLA (second language acquisition) researchers. For example, advanced Chinese learners may choose the present tense indiscriminately to refer to situations still holding at the time of speaking; they may hesitate at various points in academic paper writings; they may also choose one and the same tense in story and joke telling, where native speakers would alternate selectively between the present and past tenses. These practices are either seldom noted or considered not worthy of investigation (e.g., Lock, 1996).

The next section will detail the research focus of the study.

### **1.3 Specific contexts of past/present ambivalence**

Section 1.2 has, among other things, shown that the reasons why native speakers choose between the English simple present and past tenses are not always obvious to or straightforward for Chinese learners. There are many “grey areas” where changing from the past to present or vice versa does not seem to make much, if any, difference in interpretation or translation. The two tenses as used in native-speaker discourse often seem to be interchangeable to the minds of learners with a tenseless L1. This is so, I have argued, because the two tenses in question may not contrast in a way which involves truth-conditional meaning regarding objective temporal reference, and this is the main or indeed only criterion available to Chinese speaking learners.

I will next identify a selection of relatively well known linguistic contexts in which the choice of the past or present tense is potentially problematic for Chinese learners and which has been my special focus in this study. It is important to point out that the four specific types of tense usage under investigation can be interpreted on the basis of general temporal meaning. I will explain later in Chapter 3 that these kinds of view point driven usage can be viewed in terms of subjective temporal reference as opposed to objective temporal reference.

### 1.3.1 The non-completive past

The non-completive past or the “false past” (Lakoff, 1970, p. 840) does not indicate that the situation being described is over. According to Riddle (1986, p.267), the definition of the past tense is that the event described was “true before speech time, and that completion is not part of its denotative meaning”. Past tense meanings actually reflect a gradient from situations no longer occurring at the time of speaking (the more canonical use of the past tense to describe something that is no longer true at present) to those not completed at the time of speaking.

Contrary to common thinking, the non-completive past is a very common use of the past tense. Example (1.9) below is an advertisement posted on **GUMTREE** (an online classifieds and community website). Apparently the use of the past tense does not mean the booster seat is not handy and strong any more. Examples (1.1) and (1.2) in the preceding section also belong to this type.

- (1.9) *Booster car seat for sale. This booster seat was very handy and very strong. paid \$129.is being washed and nicely cleaned. smoke free. accident free.*

The non-completive use of the past tense is a frequent yet seldom noted phenomenon, having been addressed by only a few studies (Declerck, 2003; Klein, 1994; Lakoff, 1970; Larsen-Freeman, 2002; Riddle, 1986). The verbs associated with non-completive sense such as *be* or *have* are mostly STATIVES (using Vendler’s 1967 classification of verb types), or existential and relational processes in Halliday’s terms (Halliday, 1994). In such contexts, Chinese learners exhibit a fairly strong preference for the present over the past tense. This preference for the present tense constitutes a significant difference between these learners’ language habits and those of native speakers of English.

### 1.3.2 Tense variation in oral/conversational narrative

Grammarians have long noticed that the alternation between the past and historical present tenses is characteristic of certain oral narrative genres. The historical present tense (HP) can be defined as the use of the present tense to refer to past events. In conversational narratives and sometimes in joke-telling, HP alternates with the past tense to construct jointly a story from the speaker’s own perspective.

Example (1.10) contains both past tense verbs (clauses 2 and 6-8) and historical present verbs (clauses 1 and 3-5). It is a statement couched from the personal perspective.

- (1.10) 1. *Then all of a sudden everybody **gets** involved.*  
 2. *and they **made** a mess.*  
 3. *So uh ... this lady **says** ... uh this uh Bert, 'Oh, my son'll make them. He's an electrician.'*  
 4. *So he **makes** them.*  
 5. *and he **charges** all the neighbors twenty dollars a set, and there I **paid** three dollars.*  
 6. *So I **called** her a crook.*  
 7. *And I **called** her son a crook.*  
 8. *So, they **were** really mad at me. (Wolfson, 1979)*

Tense alternations like this often go unnoticed by native speakers (NSs) since shifting between HP and the past tense is an automatic and subconscious process. The nature of such variation has been studied by some scholars such as Wolfson (1978, 1979, 1981) and Schiffrin (1981), yet without reaching agreement as to its function in discourse. The subtle differences in meaning indicated by such instinctive switching between the present and past tenses is very difficult for non-native English speakers to master (Burrough-Boenisch, 1998). Speakers of Chinese find such switches between HP and the past tense inexplicably free and unmotivated, hence very confusing.

### 1.3.3 Tense choice in making academic attributions

The work of other researchers is often reported or referred to in academic writing. Learned citations occur, for a variety of reasons, in many different academic genres (e.g., research articles, textbooks and theses) and parts of a particular genre (e.g., the introduction and discussion sections in a thesis). Taylor (1989, p.150) states that “there are certain conventions about the use of tenses – especially past and present – in academic writing which are not intuitively obvious”. On a similar note, Hinkel (2002, p.189) also finds that “their contextual meanings can convey factually inaccurate implications and may even appear to be counterintuitive”. Burrough-Boenisch (1998) further suggests that it is a skill that native speakers themselves have to learn. Conventions advocated in the scientific community will be discussed in greater details in Section 2.1.1.

The verbs used to report or refer to past research include “research” acts such as *carry out* and *show*, “mental” or “cognitive” acts such as *think* and *suggest*, and “textual” or “discourse” acts such as *discuss* and *assert* (Hyland, 1999). Tense choices for reporting verbs exhibit greater subtlety and complexity than tense usage in scientific and academic English in general. A number of explanations have been postulated to account for the atemporal functions of the present and past tenses in academic citations, e.g., expressing degrees of generality/specificity (e.g., Oster, 1981) or proximity/distance (e.g., Swales, 1990), or the writer’s stance towards the content to be

presented(e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2002). Nevertheless, none of these explanations can fully account for the many ways in which tenses are used in learned citations. There is no single explanation, for example, for the difference between “*Chomsky (1957) claims...*” and “*Chomsky (1957) claimed....*”

#### 1.3.4 Situations with different temporal orientations

Sometimes the information to be presented concerns a situation subjectively viewable as existing either in the present or in the past. In a quiz show or trivia night, for instance, alternating tenses may be used as shown in the following example:

- (1.11) (a) *Who **is** it that first discovered America?*  
(b) *Who **was** it that first discovered America?*

There seems to be an inevitable communicative tension between different temporal orientations: the orientation towards the present of the speech situation, i.e., the interest of a quiz show in testing on objective facts (therefore the use of the present tense) vs. the orientation towards the past of the objective reality, i.e., the historical information that someone first discovered America (therefore the use of the past tense). Note that in this case, the use of the present tense or past tense is actually interchangeable. Native speakers appear to make this kind of tense switch almost randomly.

Sometimes the use of different tenses cannot be examined in isolation. The choice of tenses can be directly linked to the rhetorical function of the sentence in a discourse context. Example (1.3) which is repeated below falls in this category. In the context of a discussion that centres on Aristotle's philosophy and its present relevance, the tense could easily become almost routinely present. In discussing what specific early Greek philosophers thought about moral virtue, perhaps with more definite time reference, the tense would be more naturally past.

(1.3) is repeated here for readers' convenience:

- (1.3) (a) *I can't recall what Aristotle **says** about moral virtue.*  
(b) *I can't recall what Aristotle **said** about moral virtue.*

A similar example is (1.12):

- (1.12) (a) *Shakespeare **is** a renowned playwright.*  
(b) *Shakespeare **was** a renowned playwright.*



The above is not intended to be a comprehensive description of all the areas in which the past versus present tense choice is problematic for Chinese learners. Tense in literary works, for example, is excluded from the current discussion for being too idiosyncratic or creative. The analysis of tense deployment in the text of novels has been one of the most popular research areas in stylistics and especially in narrative theory (e.g., Bronzwaer, 1970; Casparis, 1975). Also, successful writers and professional writers often manipulate the choice of tense as a deliberate literary strategy to achieve desired effect (Smith, 2004).

To conclude, it is not possible to state the differences between the meanings of the English present and past tenses as just described purely in truth-conditional terms. The propositional content of many utterances can be expressed effectively using either the present or past tense. There seem to be no objective differences in actual time reference between these various ways of expressing a predication/proposition (except for the non-completive use of the past tense).

## **1.4 The larger context of the learning problem**

In this section I will outline some theoretical and practical factors that have implications for my study. As has been established, tense choices in English, as between simple past and present, are not based on objective distinctions in terms of actual time. Before considering the nature of tense and the typological characteristics of English and Chinese – especially in relation to the representation of temporal experience – later in this thesis, I would like to survey some broader linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of the linguistic phenomenon under examination, i.e., the past/present tense distinction, which is associated with the learning problems identified earlier. I will draw upon findings from both cross-linguistic and diachronic studies.

I would just note here that Chinese and English are typologically distinct languages. Chinese is one of many languages which have only aspect and no tense, while English is one of those languages that have both. English insists on marking every finite verb<sup>6</sup> for absolute tense<sup>7</sup>, whether or not the time orientation (*vis-à-vis* the here-and-now of the speaker) would be clear without it. Chinese, however, and many other languages do not require such marking of the verb. No one would nowadays say that Chinese speakers are unable to conceptualise the temporal differences between now, before-now and after-now; but these distinctions have not been grammaticalized in Chinese as they have been in most European languages as well as in Japanese and Korean. Some

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<sup>6</sup> Finite verb: A finite verb is a verb form that occurs in an independent clause and fully inflected according to the inflectional categories marked on verbs in the language to indicate, e.g., number, case, gender, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Absolute tense: Absolute tense is a tense that refers to a time in relation to the moment of utterance, rather than a reference time.

linguists (e.g., Huang, 1984; Tang, 1990; Tang, 2000) have suggested that Chinese has a covert tense system. However, the present study adopts the mainstream view that Chinese is a tenseless language.

### 1.4.1 NS variation in tense uses and acceptability judgements

Native-speaker usage exhibits great inherent variation with regard to tense usage, and native speakers exhibit a great deal of variability in the acceptability judgements (and rationalisations there-for) they produce in interview-type situations. Below, to illustrate this variability, I give some examples of the different choices of tense made by native speakers of English.

Sometimes native speakers themselves decide to change their minds in the middle of an utterance. For example, a speaker said “*My ex-husband **was** Greek*” (Harder, 1997, p.502-503). However, the speaker in fact subsequently commented that she should have said “*My ex-husband **is** Greek*” since he was still alive. A similar example is from a TV interview program<sup>8</sup> in which the interviewee, Malcolm Turnbull, the then leader of the opposition party, talks about his deceased old man.

- (1.13) “*Who’s my personal hero, my personal hero, honestly, is my father. Now, he’s not a great .... Obviously he **is not** with us any more, he was not a great theologian, but he had much more influence on me than I suspect Dietrich Bonhoeffer has had on Kevin Rudd.*”

Another example is provided by a native English speaker in our email correspondence:

- (1.14) “*Here is a passage I had trouble with in terms of tense choice: ‘I’m glad you enjoyed the article and that the process of identity formation through writing **sounded** > **sounds** ‘true to life’ in your eyes. [**I made the above change half-self-consciously.**]* (Emphasis added) *One thing I get from that article is the way the students’ identities can be reshaped through a dialogue with the teacher’.*”

Sometimes the tense uses of L1 novice writers deviate from those of L1 professional writers. For example, Dudley-Evans (1991) reports a supervisor changing the tense in drafts of an NS biology PhD thesis. Smith (2004) found that some extended uses found in L1 professional writing, such as using tense/aspect to indicate relevant vs. irrelevant concepts or to negotiate conflicting ideas, were largely absent in L1 student writing.

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/video.htm?pres=20080925&story=1>

There are also times when one native speaker of English gets annoyed by the use of tenses of another. For example, a newspaper feature article in *Sydney Morning Herald*<sup>9</sup> titled “*To be or not to be, that was the question*” reports how the author got angry with the use of past tense in questions like “What **was** your name?”, “What **was** your date of birth?”, asked over phone by customer service representative.

And finally, sometimes people from different age groups of the same speech community disagree on some innovative use of tenses. This applies to other tensed languages like Japanese. For example, Kubo (2006) reports that speakers of the older generation complained that an innovative use of past tense, as in “**Was** coffee correct?” (in confirming customers’ order), instead of the expected use of the present tense, sounded “wrong”, “rude” and “unintelligent”.

#### **1.4.2 World Englishes**

The English past/present tense distinction may be subject to the influence of regional varieties nowadays referred to as “world Englishes”. As is well known, native speakers from different English-speaking countries do not necessarily use the language in the same way. For example, it is well recognized that American English (AE) and British English (BE) differ from each other not only in vocabulary terms but also in certain areas of grammar, including the use of present perfect. In American English, the simple past tense is often used to give news whereas in British English the present perfect is often used (Swan, 1995). While being aware of the possibility for any dialectal effect, this study presupposes that there is no major regional difference in the use of the present and past tenses among native speakers of English, be it AE, BE, Canadian English and Australian English (AusE).

#### **1.4.3 Diachronic change**

Just like other grammatical structures, the English past/present tense distinction has also been subject to the influence of diachronic changes in the English language system. The use of tenses in SLA has previously been studied from a synchronic point of view. However, evolution or chronological change of language is an ongoing process. If we situate the learning problem in a historical context, the picture would be very different. As a matter of fact, the use of historical present tense was rare in Old English if there was any (Mitchchell & Robinson, 2005). Therefore, due clarification is in order that it is modern day English (as opposed to Old or Middle English)

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<sup>9</sup><http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/to-be-or-not-to-be-that-was-the-question-20090913-fm9v.html>

that the present study is interested in; and the same applies to learners' L1, i.e., modern Mandarin Chinese.

#### **1.4.4 Cross-linguistic differences in tense usage**

Another related aspect of the learning problem is whether the distinction made between the present and past tense in other tensed languages, such as Japanese, French, Dutch, Greek and German, is the same as that made in English. In other words, can we assume that tenses conventionally named past and present in English necessarily function the same way as tenses with similar names in other tensed languages? Do they divide up time in the same way? Or, from the perspective of L2 acquisition, do L1-Chinese learners of other tensed languages such as Japanese and French face the same learning problem as do Chinese learners of English?

In fact, cross-linguistic differences in tense usage do exist. As Vet & Veters (1994, p.1) put it,

[Tense and aspect] reflect the different ways time is conceptualized by a speech community. It remains unclear, however, why there exists such an amazing ways to express these concepts and why tense and aspect distinctions generally constitute the most difficult parts of the language system for non-native language learners, even if the target language is genetically very close to the native one.

It is predictable that a grammatical category like tense will not have exactly the same range of uses in different languages. Andersen (1982) asserts that a grammatical category such as the "Perfect" will not have exactly the same range of uses in one language as it does in another. Similarly, Croft (2012) states that any form has multiple uses in a particular language. The corresponding form in another language will also have multiple uses in that language. The normal state of affairs is that the set of uses of corresponding forms will overlap – enough for linguists to give the corresponding forms the same grammatical label (such as Perfective), but not enough to posit a universal grammatical category.

Indeed Comrie (1976, p.73) long ago stated that the present historic is "perhaps rather less common in English than in other European languages." Relatedly, Burrough-Boenisch (2003, p.18) claims that, in academic texts, "[T]he present historic is certainly more common in Dutch than in English... In German, the present tense is also less marked than in English." Chafe (1980, p. 65) found that Americans exhibited a strong tendency to tell their narratives in the present tense, whereas the Greeks preferred the past and found the American way of telling jokes "strange" and "illogical". Thus in evaluating the results of the current research, it is important to bear in mind both the peculiarities of the English tenses and the precise nature of tense in general.

## 1.5 Aims of the study

The present study has developed three related aims over time, one leading to another. Firstly, the project set out with a clear pedagogical objective, which was to improve the teaching and learning of English tense usage for advanced Chinese learners. These advanced EFL learners not only include English majors with undergraduate or graduate degrees but also supervisors of PhD candidates in linguistics. There is one very common, practical puzzle amongst them: Which tense should be used in a given context, present or past? Instructions that they normally obtain from language teachers and grammar/writing reference books are not as useful as expected. If they try to work out the rules by investigating how tenses are used by English native speakers, they may only find themselves even more perplexed. Why was present tense or past tense used in this particular case? Questions like these represent a considerable part of the difficulties experienced by advanced Chinese learners of English. I hoped to provide an answer to their learning puzzles.

A second more ambitious aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of the actual nature of tense. This is a natural corollary of the first aim because, during the course of the enquiry into the “rules” which purport to govern native speaker usage, it soon became obvious that tense usage is “even more complex than was thought” (Lakoff, 1970, p. 838). As we shall see in Chapter 2, the field of linguistics is still very much divided as to the nature of tense. As Binnick (1991, p.vii), for example, has remarked, “our knowledge of tense has increased greatly, but our understanding of it has deepened less”.

The third aim of this study was to explore the implications of the learning difficulties with regard to the English tenses for the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis. The hypothesis in its strongest form suggests that the forms of a language – both its lexis and its grammar – impose upon its speakers a particular conception of reality. The choices that the grammar of a language in particular makes available to its speakers, the distinctions and markings it imposes on representations of reality, will affect speakers’ conceptions and ultimately perceptions of that reality. Intriguing as this hypothesis is, it is all but impossible to step out of one’s own language to test or critique it (Lakoff, 2000). However, second language acquisition, particularly the acquisition of a grammatical category that is absent in the source language, provides such a testing ground. Based on the analysis of my data, I suggest that tense represents a particular way of conceptualizing reality, in effect an ego-centric mode of construing events. The fundamental reason for advanced Chinese learners’ difficulties in acquiring the present and past tenses lies in their distinct language-specific perspectives on event construal, which do not involve a comparable set of ego-centric coordinates.

## 1.6 Research questions

In sum, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- (1) What are the patterns of tense choices and interpretations for NSs and NNSs with respect to the four problematic areas of English tense usage in question?
- (2) What factors may account for the observed patterns of tense choices and interpretations for NSs and NNSs?
- (3) What is the relation between NS and NNS tense choices/interpretations and language-specific perspectives on event construal?

## 1.7 Outline of the thesis structure

Chapter two surveys previous literature in four subfields, viz., studies related to the problematic aspects of tense usage, semantic theories of tense, L2 tense acquisition, and the linguistic relativity hypothesis. Gaps are identified at the end of each section.

Chapter three presents the conceptual and methodological framework applied in the present study. The central differences between the English and Chinese temporal systems are discussed in the light of event construal. The root for advanced Chinese EFL learners' learning difficulties with respect to the four problematic aspects of tense usage is proposed accordingly.

Chapter four describes the research methods developed in this study. The methodology of survey was adopted in this study, which consisted of two stages: a written survey and a follow-up interview.

Chapter five reports the results based on quantitative and qualitative analyses. The findings are interpreted in terms of the effect of language-specific perspectives on event construal. A detailed discussion of various factors involved in tense choices and interpretations for the NSs and NNSs is provided at the end.

Chapter six concludes with a brief discussion in the order of the three aims proposed in Chapter one. It also includes theoretical and pedagogical implications of the present investigation, and contains some suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

Chapter 2 draws together research of different strands and aspects that are directly related to the learning problems sketched in Chapter 1. This chapter aims to serve as the background against which the present study was conducted. I hope to clarify the current state of relevant knowledge by providing a critical survey of previous work and to establish that there are significant gaps in this knowledge that have warranted the present study.

This chapter is divided into four sections. Section 2.1 reviews existing research on the four types of English tense usage under discussion. Section 2.2 briefly introduces the standard semantic theory of tense along with some of the alternative approaches to tense semantics, and discusses their limitations in relation to the four problematic areas of tense uses. Section 2.3 outlines major approaches to tense-aspect research within the SLA research tradition. Section 2.4 discusses the relevance of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis for my project.

### **2.1 Previous research on the four types of English tense uses**

If we are to analyze the errors of second language learners, we must base such an analysis on a comparison with native speaker usage. However, a researcher may encounter considerable difficulties analysing native speaker usage of tense and aspect due to language variation and change (see Section 1.4). Variationist sociolinguists (e.g., van Herk, 2008 on factors conditioning the choice between the present perfect and the simple past) link extralinguistic factors such as medium, region, gender, and age with language use and accord a clearly defined status to the social value of linguistic expressions as part of speakers' grammatical knowledge. While acknowledging the significance of variationist tradition, the review presented below will not incorporate it as part of the survey since there is no research to my knowledge in the variationist fashion which directly addresses the choice between the present and past tenses with regard to the four types of English tense usage of interest.

In this section, I will start by reviewing work on native tense uses in reporting past statements because research in English for Scientific and Technology (EST) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has delivered complicated accounts (see Section 2.1.1). I will then proceed to evaluate investigations concerning a) the alternation between historical present and past tenses in oral narratives (Section 2.1.2), b) the non-completive past tense (Section 2.1.3), and c) tense uses in situations susceptible to dual perspectives (Section 2.1.4).

### 2.1.1 Tense usage in academic citations in EST/EAP contexts

The use of tense in reporting research that has been carried out in the past (i.e. prior to the time of writing) is an important topic that has attracted an exceptionally copious body of research in both English for Science and Technology (EST) and English for academic purposes (EAP). There is a practical need for this line of inquiry apart from theoretical interests as incorrect choice of a verb tense may cause ambiguity or confusion for readers.

The choice of tense with regard to reporting past literature is generally between present simple, past simple and present perfect, as other tenses are only used infrequently. Methodologically speaking, the studies under review below are characterized by analyses of corpora of scientific and academic writings which vary in discipline, genre and rhetorical divisions. I will now summarize and discuss their findings, under five headings, in the following sub-sections.

#### 2.1.1.1 Discourse conventions in EST/EAP contexts

A very common conception regarding the appropriateness of tense uses in academic/scientific writing is that writers' tense choice in EST and EAP discourse is usually governed by conventions. For example, scientific English is often represented as having certain tense conventions that are presented as "rules" (Day, 1995, p.72):

1. Established knowledge(previous results) should be given in the present tense;
2. Description of methods and results in the current paper should be in the past tense;
3. Presentation(*Table 1 shows that...*) is given in the present tense;
4. Attribution (*Jones **reported** that...*) is given in the past tense.

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2010) also asserts that it is incorrect to use present tense when discussing another researcher's work, e.g., \**Sanchez (2000) presents the same results*. The correct use should be *Sanchez (2000) **presented** the same results*.

There are much finer descriptions of conventions which leave due room for tense variations. Cooley & Lewkowicz (2003), for example, distinguished five rhetorical purposes in making use of source materials:

- (a) When referring to what was done in a single study or a series of studies, the past tense should be used;
- (b) When referring to what was said/ written by another researcher, both past and present tenses can be used. The choice depends on how the writer views a document that he or



she reads: if what is written is viewed as a completed event, i.e., the actual writing of the paper is now over, the past tense should be used; if the paper is considered as a source of information that now exists and will continue to exist, the present tense should be used.

- (c) When conveying the present state of a debate in the field, both past and present tense can be used. If the debate is currently taking place and no consensus has been reached, the present tense should be used; if the debate which took place in the past has now been settled, the past tense should be used.
- (d) When referring to a whole area of study, rather than any specific work in that area, the present perfect is often used.
- (e) When indicating the current accepted state of affairs, the present perfect is preferred.

Cooley & Lewkowicz also point out that some writers like to vary the tense to avoid monotony, therefore it is common to find both past and present simple used within one paragraph without creating any misunderstandings. They further note the factor of disciplinary preference for using one tense or the other when referring to a previous paper. Nonetheless, the account for tense use by resorting to disciplinary variation is insufficient. For one thing, there are noticeable variations within each discipline. For another, tense use within each discipline is subject to diachronic changes which, among other things, correspond to changes in their respective scientific context. As will be shown in Section 2.1.1.3, we have to go further and look at the nature of such disciplinary differences, say, between physical sciences and biological sciences (Banks, 2006). The physical sciences, for example, were already experimental in the second half of the seventeenth century whereas the biological sciences were descriptive and only began to be experimental only from the middle of the nineteenth century.

As we can see, tense conventions are inculcated not only by manuals of writing but also by the house style of journal policy. While some conventions are presented as prescriptive “rules”, others strive to be descriptively accurate by characterizing predominant tendencies and various constraints. But few, if any, can avoid the problem of oversimplification as the idea of convention itself is very much oriented towards normative or typical patterns, rather than the vicissitudes of tense uses. In fact, Burrough-Boenisch (2003) has found that tense conventions in English scientific and academic writing are not adhered to slavishly by NSs. She examined NS readers’ response to NNS tense use in scientific writing and the finding was that present tense conventions in scientific English could be and were ignored. NS readers were more likely to accept tense uses deviating from conventions if there were sufficient contextual clues and other linguistic factors indicating sentence function (see Section 2.1.1.3).

### 2.1.1.2 Non-temporal interpretations

Non-temporal analysis is commonly applied to the treatment of tense usage in EST and EAP discourse. It is well known that in certain contexts, a tense has atemporal or modal meanings, most clearly perhaps in conditional/subjunctive sentences (e.g., Smith, 2007). Past tense, for instance, is often associated with modality expressing non-actual, irrealis, and distanced meanings. Consequently, tense choice in reporting past research may not be dependent on time lines as most textbooks presuppose, but on considerations of rhetorical purposes.

Exponents of this line of research (e.g., Oster, 1981; Salager-Meyer, 1992; Swales, 1990) contend that tense choice with reporting verbs in EST and EAP contexts can signal an author's subjective attitude or assessment towards the cited work. Table 2.1 summarizes the proposed correlations between tense uses and various non-temporal meanings.

**Table 2.1 Proposed correlations between tense uses and various non-temporal meanings**

Present tense	Past tense
Generality	Specificity
Perceived relevance	Irrelevant
Supportive	Non-supportive
Proximity	Distance
Foregrounding	Backgrounding
Agreement	Disagreement

Riddle (1986), for example, proposes that past tense may be used as a backgrounding device and present tense as a foregrounding device. When a claim from an existing work is cited as background information to a study, perhaps to offer a historical perspective, the past tense is preferred. When an existing work is discussed in terms of the current validity of its claims and their bearing on the main point to be developed, the present is usually chosen, thereby foregrounding the information. Present tense is used in “*Werner (1948) writes about primitive languages in the following terms*” although the actual action denoted by the verb *write* in its general sense took place in the past.

The distinction between temporal and non-temporal uses of tense is not always clear-cut. On the one hand, Swales (1990) suggests that proximity/distance can be understood either in terms of temporal frame (i.e., when the work was done) or perceived relevance (i.e., the degree of current, continuing relevance or interest). On the other hand, some researchers (e.g., Malcolm, 1987) call for a comprehensive analysis of tense choice in EST and EAP discourse which specifies a hierarchical relationship between context-independent temporal meanings and context-dependent rhetorical functions.

### **2.1.1.3 Diachronic change**

A truly innovative approach to tense usage in EST and EAP contexts was taken by Banks (2006), which yields impressive results from a diachronic perspective. In his corpus from 1770 to 1980, references to other work used in the section of presentation/discussion of results have demonstrated a good deal of variation.

- (1) The most typical pattern is that both reporting verbs and the contents cited are in the present tense.
- (2) A relatively rare pattern is that the reporting verbs are in the present but the contents cited are in the past.
- (3) Another pattern, which appears to a twentieth century phenomenon, is that reporting verbs are in the past and the contents are usually presented in the present.

Banks also notes a peculiar case written in 1900, as shown in the following example, where the writer uses all the combinations of present and past possible, even passing from one to the other. Clearly, there is a switch from present to past although the “*he*” of “*he considers*” is coreferential with the “*he*” of “*he denied*”. Banks suggests that the reference to *Brunchorst* may motivate this change.

- (2.1) *He **considers** the tubercles developed in these two genera to be typical of the two classes found in all the Leguminosæ, and **describes** in detail their respective relations to the vascular bundles of the roots, and the special characters of the inner "Bacteroid" tissue, noting in particular the absence of filaments along with Bacteroids in the cells of the tubercles of Lupinus. In accordance with Brunchorst, he **denied** the parasitic nature of the Bacteroids; indeed, he **considered** the tubercles themselves to be merely storehouses of reserve material, chiefly albuminoids and possibly also starch.*

#### **2.1.1.4 Correlations between tense choices and other linguistic features**

Some researchers (e.g., Charles, 2006; Shaw, 1992) have investigated the phraseological patterning between tense uses and other linguistic elements. Charles (2006), for example, further divided reporting verbs into different semantic groups. Evidence of patterning was found in verb groups and the tenses that occur with them: ARGUE verb group (e.g., *argue*, *note*, *suggest*) predominantly with present tense whereas FIND/SHOW (e.g., *find*, *realise*) verb group with past tense. Nevertheless the results also suggest that these correlations between tense choice and verb type do not purport to explain every single case.

In NS writing, tense choice also interacts at a wider level with choices made regarding other linguistic elements and categories such as subjects, grammatical voice and sentence type, with the aim to achieve certain rhetorical effects (Shaw, 1992). Shaw suggests that we probably should not suggest to learners that particular tenses have any special status as signals of writers' attitude or discourse function of the statement. He argues that although systematic correlations have been found between grammatical voice, tense, and sentence function (e.g., degree of generality), the correlation may be partly secondary consequences of subject choice which itself derives from considerations of information structure and cohesion. Interpretations of sentence functions therefore should not be directly attributed to specific tense choices. In this connection, the discussion of topicalization and topic change may be important as well in terms of thematization: selection of a particular noun as subject/theme entails selection of active or passive, and with this past or perfect.

#### **2.1.1.5 Social implications of tense use in scientific and academic writing**

In EST and EAP discourse, verb tenses not only indicate the status of scientific knowledge, but also have social connotations (Matthews, Matthews, & Bowen, 2000). Present tense, for example, can be used to indicate, as a compliment, that the findings of another researcher have become part of the accepted body of scientific knowledge. Past tense is advised for young scientists to report their own experimental findings as a signal of modesty to the scientific community at large. It is up to senior members of the scientific community to decide whether these findings are sufficiently grounded to be accorded the status of general truth. This kind of tense usage is generally considered part of the culture of science (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003).

To conclude, the choice of tense in intertextual reference involves a substantial amount of subjectivity. An important feature of EST/EAP discourse is that under certain conditions, authors can choose the temporal identity of a referent depending on various factors. As Cooley &

Lewkowicz (2003, p.52) notes, there are “few fixed rules about the use of tense when referring to sources, particularly when choosing between the past and present simple”.

### **2.1.2 Historical Present/Simple Past alternation in oral narratives**

The historical present (HP) refers to the use of the present tense to refer to past events. In English and many other Indo-European languages, the use of historical present is a highly conventionalized feature of narrative (Casparis, 1975; Wolfson, 1978). It is common to consider the use of HP as a matter of style. In modern English, for example, the HP is often associated with a colloquial style. As will be shown below, studies have demonstrated that in oral narrative, the HP should not be viewed merely as a stylistic device since it is not a simple replacement of the past tense. Instead, there appear to be “rules” for their alternation. I will now look at several major studies attempting to account for the distributional patterns and functions of the HP/past alternation.

In traditional analyses, the function of the historical present is to foreground significant points in the story, thereby heightening the dramatic impact of the events being referred to. Conventional grammars (e.g., Quirk *et al.* 1985, p.181-183) have long acknowledged its function to “dramatize” particular events of a story. It is argued that the HP presents the events as if they were occurring before us as the story is being told, hence giving the impression of vividness (Jespersen, 1924).

Some researchers (e.g., Wolfson, 1978, 1979, 1981) argue that the function of the HP cannot simply be to dramatize particular events as many stories are so organized that what seems to be the most important event is given in the past tense. The switch between conversational historical present (CHP) and past tense, in Wolfson’s view, operates to separate important events and points in a narrative from one another. Thus it is the switch that is the key. Correlations were found in Wolfson (1979) between the variation and the unfolding and signalling of narrative structures. She suggests that not only the HP in itself has no significance but also the direction of alternation does not matter. Instead, the HP works jointly with the past tense as a discourse feature, with the two tenses alternating in conversational narrative to “structure the experience from the point of view of the speaker and to dramatize it” (p. 216).

Other researchers (e.g., Schiffrin, 1981; Silva-Corvalan, 1983) make use of knowledge of narrative structure to study this grammatical variation (cf., Labov, 1972). They found that in spoken narrative data, the HP tends to cluster in the complicating action segments of narratives where narratives are seen as oral versions of experience in which events are relayed in the order in which they presumably occurred. The complicating action is the section that tells the story by relaying a series of temporally-ordered narrative events. The co-occurrence with climactic events indicates that HP is an internal evaluation device: it allows the narrator to transform his or her

experience by presenting events which represent the most climactic moments as if they were occurring before us so that the audience can interpret for itself the significance of those events for the experience.

Johnstone (1987) analysed the HP/past tense alternation in American English, focusing on dialog introducers such as *she says/said* or *he goes/went*. She relates verb tense alternation with a new factor – the relative status of the reported speakers. The voice of public authority is frequently patterned with HP because the simple present in English can be used in a timeless and universalizing sense. The examples which do not follow this pattern tend to represent authority figures as individual authors of their words.

Chrystalla (2011) examined the HP in conjunction with other linguistic elements in modern Greek such as indefinite nouns and verb types, suggesting that the main function of HP appears to be the introduction of new/important information. This function can produce a “dramatic” effect by highlighting important events.

McCarthy and Carter (1994) suggest that the contrast in tense forms is used to give structure to the story. In English, for example, a joke-telling situation will often switch from past to present once the discourse form is successfully established as a conversational topic and then continue in present till the end of the joke.

Summing up, the fact that some explanations show mutual contradictions suggests that English native speakers may make the HP/past switches for a variety of reasons. No single explanation is thus sufficient for the particular instances of their choice in narrative contexts. Despite some general constraints, tense choice in oral narrative may be an individual and idiosyncratic matter in the end. To some degree, the way the HP/simple past alternation is utilized is entirely up to the individual speaker. Any complete analysis therefore should include individual rhetorical situations. We might progress towards a richer account of the factors underpinning tense choice by combining quantitative methodology with qualitative microanalyses of what individual speakers do in particular situations.

### **2.1.3 The non-completive past**

The non-completive past makes reference to a situation whose time frame in reality extends from past to the present. The speaker may use the past tense rather than the present to describe the situation which could exist at speech time without any completive connotation.

Lakoff (1970) drew attention to the role of speaker viewpoint in the use of the non-completive past. She proposes that the choice of tense is based in part on the subjective factor of how the

speaker feels in relation to the event in question. The two minimally contrasting statements illustrate that the speaker in (a) may or may not have been aware, before he stepped on it, that a kitten was present; the speaker in (b) is unaware of the identity of what he has stepped on until he turns around and looks at it and subsequently speaks.

(2.2) (a) *What I just stepped on **was** a kitten.*

(b) *What I just stepped on **is** a kitten.*

Declerck (2003) holds that the speaker's choice of tense may depend not only on the actualization time of the situation, but also on the speaker's choice of temporal focus, i.e., point of view or *Exp-PoV* as she puts it. The person who directly experiences or perceives the situation referred to in the sentence may adopt a past *Exp-PoV*. In (2.3a), past tense conveys opaque reading whereas in (2.3b), present tense conveys transparent reading, i.e., the speaker assumes responsibility for the truth of his statement.

(2.3) (a) *They were very tired, because the slope they were climbing **was** very steep.*

(b) *They were very tired, because the slope they were climbing **is** very steep.*

Larsen-Freeman *et al.* (2002) points out that grammatical knowledge consists of knowing when to use forms to convey meanings that match our intention in particular contexts, even when the propositional meaning is more or less held constant. She used Riddle (1986)'s example to illustrate psychological distance:

(2.4) *Anne: Jane just bought a Volvo.*

*John: Maureen **has** one.*

*Anne: John, you've got to quit talking about Maureen as if you were still going together. You broke up three months ago.*

In their interpretation, John could have stated the same propositional content using the past tense even though Maureen's ownership of the Volvo still obtains. Anne therefore chides John for his continued attachment to Maureen. She infers that John still feels psychologically close to Maureen because he has reported her ownership of the car using the simple present tense.

Hinkel (1997) also notes that the learning of English past tense meanings and uses has long been recognized as a complex issue in L2 acquisition. She argues that NNSs may need to develop new conceptualizations of the extent and boundaries to time and tense within contextual frames as temporal discourse frames may vary across cultures and require particular verb tenses. An English

native speaker, for example, may believe the underlined tense in “*I studied hard because I wanted to please my parents*” refers to the past time whereas an NNS may see a desire to please one’s parents as generally true and not necessarily referring exclusively to the past time.

Riddle (1986) is probably the first to explicitly associate the learning problem with the meaning of past tense. She suggests that a key resource of difficulty may be that the past tense is generally taught as having a completive sense, while a more general meaning and discourse conditions on its use go unrecognized. In actual discourse, the speaker’s point of view and communicative purpose play a crucial role in the selection of the past tense. The past tense may be used if the purpose is to present information or ask a question from a past point of view. In questions such as “*How **was** Holland?*”, the past tense is used to focus on the addressee’s experience of visiting a place rather than to request an objective description of the person or thing in question. In this case, the fact or nature of a person’s association with a particular situation in the past is more relevant to the purpose in speaking than the objective current existence of that situation. Riddle notes that teachers and students often fail to recognize the extent to which a speaker’s point of view and purpose in performing a speech action condition the choice made between the present and past tenses.

#### **2.1.4 Situations with logically equivalent temporal orientations**

Are there situations in which it is logically possible to use either the past or the present tense? One case we have shown above is a situation whose time frame extends from the past to the present. The other is a situation subjectively viewable as existing in either the present or the past. In spite of the fact that the present and simple past tenses constitute the most fundamental distinction in the English tense system, there are intermediate situations in which the boundary of the situation to be described is logically fuzzy.

Sometimes native speakers do have the freedom to deploy different tenses in performing identical communicative tasks due to taking different temporal perspectives. This can be illustrated by the alternating tenses used in certain types of reports to refer to the same subject matter. In the “tasting notes” by world famous wine critic Robert Parker (Paradis & Hommerberg, 2010), a strong preference is showed for the present tense in descriptions of the tasting event which apparently took place in the past. For example:

(2.5) [*The 2005...*] **exhibits** a deep ruby/purple colour along with notes of sweet, mineral-laced black cherries.

However, past tense is also used as shown in (2.6). Note that the past tense use cited here indicates negative comments.



(2.6) *An atypical 2003 white, the 2003 Crozes-Hermitage blanc from Albert Belle **was** acidified, tart, and green.*

It is argued by Paradis & Hommerberg that the present tense formulation in these descriptions is generic in the sense that the qualities are presented as permanent attributes of the wine. The use of the present tense thus suggests that the addressee will have the same experience of the wine if/when she tastes it (and every time she tastes it). The present tense thus evokes a state that is always present out of time, as a structural part of our model of reality (Brisard, 2002; Jaszczolt, 2009). Temporality is a function of epistemic control (Langacker, 2009) and it takes a conscious effort on the part of the reader to uncover the fact that what is being described is the writer's personal perceptual experience at some specific moment in the past. Such validity claims are rhetorically significant, since they are indications of the ways in which writers/speakers achieve their purposes, i.e. how they negotiate with or manipulate their audiences. Paradis & Hommerberg argue that the present tense may also be interpreted in terms of "vividness". It invites the reader to take part in the describer's perceptual experiences thus enhancing the direct sensory perceptions as if they coincide with when the writer meets the reader.

In scientific English writing, the statement of purpose may be written from one of two alternative orientations (Weissberg & Buker, 1990, p. 69) (1) the orientation of the statement of purpose may be towards the report itself – that is, it may refer to the paper (thesis, dissertation, or report) that communicates the information about the research. In this case, present tense should be used, e.g., "*The purpose of the thesis is to determine...*" (2) or the orientation of the statement of purpose may be towards the research activity, in other words the study itself, rather than the written report. In this case, past tense should be used, e.g., "*The purpose of this study **was** to determine ....*"

Banks (2006) found that in his corpus, experiments are usually presented as narratives, and in this case they are expressed in the past. This occurs in the physical sciences throughout the period from 1770 to 1980, and in the biological sciences from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. However, exceptions occur when the experiment is expressed either as a general procedure, or as a recipe, the latter being usually the experiments of others; in these cases it is the present that is used. Another diachronic change involves the description of equipment which is usually in the present, but past forms occur after 1900.

### **2.1.5 Summary**

We can see that in previous teaching oriented accounts there is a tendency to emphasize various discourse/rhetorical functions of tense over basic temporal meanings, if not disregarding the latter totally. By calling for attention to discourse constraints upon tense choice, Hinkel (1997,

2002) and Malcolm (1987) claim the existence of a hierarchical relationship, in which the discourse-level consideration conflicts with sentence-level temporal meaning. The conflict itself, however, may not exist at all. Taylor (1989) argued that the rhetorical uses of tense can be explained by temporal factors and basic meanings of the tenses. In other words, the general (temporal) meaning of tense can be taken as point of departure and various uses of tense as its exemplifications in actual contexts.

There is a risk that analyses which try to track the relations between tense and rhetorical functions end up with a system which is not necessary. Harder (1997, p. 490) argues that “one should not wish to proliferate grammar beyond necessity; if there is a plausible contextual explanation for a linguistic phenomenon, there is no reason to set up more levels of the system to account for them”. Harder’s criticism concerns the risk of building features which are part of the context into the linguistic system. The motivation for different uses of tense may be in the context but that does not motivate inclusion of context in the tense system. Furthermore, findings from most of the above studies lack general applicability power as to explain how tenses are used and interpreted in context. On the one hand, different categories have been postulated that are unique to a specific type of text, therefore cannot easily be transferred to analyses of other types. On the other hand, it is difficult to set up mutually exclusive categories. Interpreting the rhetorical function of tense in discourse is often subject to researchers’ own focal interest.

In this study, I shall not divide tense usage according to rhetorical functions in the way other researchers did. I am more inclined to the belief that uses should follow meaning, rather than the other way around. Hence, I will ascribe the complex multitude of tense choices between past and present to one single factor: basic temporal meaning. Verbal temporal forms may serve to do fulfil many pragmatic and discourse functions, but what they can do is obviously linked to what they can mean. The options an English speaker has with respect to tense use operates precisely on the relation on the context and meaning of tenses. This, however, does not change the meaning of the respective tense form. In the next section, I will survey the theories of the meaning of tenses.

## **2.2 Semantic theories of tense**

The most widely-accepted definition of tense is perhaps given by Comrie in which tense is characterized as the “grammaticalized expression of location in time” (1985, p.9). Comrie’s definition reflects prior work by numerous predecessors, among whom Reichenbach deserves special mention as his formalism has become widely used (Reichenbach, 1947). There are alternative theories that differ from this traditional account in a number of ways, but they all acknowledge the crucial fact that tense is a deictic category in that it relates the time of the event reported to the here-and-now of the speaker. In this section, I will begin by discussing what we

might call the standard theory, followed by discussions of four other theories that are considered illuminating to the present study.

### 2.2.1 Comrie and Reichenbach: The standard accounts

The standard account starts from the notion that tense locates a situation with respect to some reference time, by default the moment of speaking, and looks at relative sequential ordering between the two time points. This definition appears rather transparent. It involves only two elements: the time of utterance, most often labelled S, and the time at which an event or state occurs or holds, most often labelled E. Temporal relations holding between these two times are defined as either present (E overlapping with S), past (E before S) or future (E after S). Under appropriate conditions, S may also be identified with times other than the time of coding (i.e., speaking or writing), for example, the time of decoding (Declerck, 1991).

The relationship between S and E, however, is not always direct. Reichenbach (1947) introduced a third element, Reference time (R), mainly for the analysis of the so-called relative tenses such as the perfect. Reichenbach is not very specific about what exactly Reference time is. All he says is that R is the time of some other event. In the case of relative tenses, such as the English present perfect or past perfect, E and R are distinct: the time that the speaker is referring to (R) is a time that either precedes or follows the time of the state of affairs denoted by the sentence (S). In the analysis of the present perfect, for example, R and S fall together, both following E, as in *John has left*. In the analysis of the past perfect, as in *John had left when Mary came to the party*, R (John's leaving) is before E (Mary's coming to the party), both preceding S.

According to Reichenbach, R and E are identical in the case of the simple tenses. The time referred to is also the time of the state of affairs denoted by the sentence. As in *John left*, R and E are the same, both preceding S. However, there are some problems with this account. It runs into considerable difficulty in explaining the non-completive past tense. See the second clause in the example below:

(2.7) *I took a cab back to the hotel. The cab driver was Latvian.* (Michaelis, 2006)

In (2.7), R cannot be the same as E as the cab driver is presumably still Latvian now. Michaelis notes that R is the time established by the first sentence: the time of the cab ride. So the concept of Reference time is rather vague in such stative/durative situations. Some researchers (e.g., Declerck 1991; Taylor, 1977) hold that Reference time refers to the temporal standpoint or perspective from which a situation is presented or from which the speaker invites his audience to

consider the event. But it is not very clear in their work whether tense specifies the temporal relation between S and E or between S and R.

The standard accounts offered by descriptive grammarians generally see tense in a logical framework. The definition of tense is very much oriented towards the objective representation of time, especially the objective time span that the situation described by the clause actually takes up. The ways in which tense is actually used in everyday life is not addressed sufficiently.

### 2.2.2 Klein: The time-relational account

As noted above, the standard accounts immediately run into difficulties with stative/durative situations. Problems like this along with other non-canonical tense uses have prompted Klein to develop an innovative analysis. Klein (1994) uses the following examples to illustrate the problem with the standard accounts, in which clauses containing stative /durative verbs are underlined.

(2.8) *They found John in the bathtub. He was dead.*

(2.9) *Then, these figures were multiplied. The result was ninety four.*

In (2.8), the situation described in the second clause is that of *John's being dead*. By stating *He was dead*, the speaker clearly does not want to assert that E, the time of *his being dead*, precedes S, the time of utterance. Similarly in (2.9), the time of *the result's being ninety four* is not confined to sometime before the time of utterance.

Klein claims that tense does not serve to locate the event in relation to the moment of speech, or, with some modifications, to locate the happening of the event in relation to a reference point. He replaces Reichenbach's R by the notion of topic time (TT) – “the time span to which the claim made on a given occasion is constrained”. There are three key orientation points in Klein's account: TU (time of utterance, equivalent to S), TT (topic time, alternative to R) and T-SIT (time of situation, equivalent to E). Tense does not express a temporal relation between T-SIT and TU as defined in the standard theory; rather, it expresses a temporal relation between TT and TU.

It is therefore important to distinguish carefully TT from T-SIT. They are two different types of time spans relevant to the time of an utterance. T-SIT refers to the time span at which the situation obtains. It is equal to the “existential status” of the situation (John, 1981). TT refers to the time span about which something is said, and is thus distinct from Reference time (R). In other words, TT is the time “about which” an assertion is made, rather than the time “at which” an assertion is made. The underlined use of past tense in (2.8) thus actually indicates that it is not T-SIT (*his being dead*) but TT (the time span about which we made the assertion *his being dead*) that precedes TU.

TT can be represented in many different ways. For example, it can be explicitly specified by an adverbial in the sentence-initial position, as in *Yesterday at five, I finished the book*. It can be the time of some other situation mentioned in the preceding context, as in the first sentence of *I entered the room. He had left*. It can also be specified by a preceding question, as in *What did you notice when you entered the room? – The light was on*.

### 2.2.3 Langacker: A cognitive approach

In Langacker's Cognitive Grammar, both tense and aspect are considered as grounding predications. Langacker's (1991) theory of tense is based on the notion of grounding, which designates a process by establishing a conceptual relationship with the communicative scene.

The grounding of clause meaning is achieved by the tense of the main verb, sometimes in combination with modal verbs, which is understood as a fused system expressing two dichotomies: reality vs. irreality, and proximal vs. distal. The reality status distinction is expressed via the presence or absence of a modal, and the proximal-distal element is encoded by tense. The temporal interpretation of the proximal-distal pair is seen as secondary: "at the schematic level, the system is purely one of modality". However, when the "reality" dimension is chosen, the proximal-distal choice is prototypically reflected in temporal distinctions. I shall now describe the purely temporal aspect of his theory.

Temporal grounding characterizes various perceptions about situations or processes in Langacker's term in relation to the speech time. The important breakthrough of cognitive tense theory is that tense is subjective in nature. Speakers can choose different tenses, based on various viewing arrangements to describe the temporal relation of the same, objective situation. See the following pair of objectively synonymous sentences:

(2.10) (a) *John **tells** me that he **is** going to college next year.*

(b) *John **told** me that he **would** be going to college next year.*

The two examples above, in so far as they describe the same objective situation, illustrate subjective construal. Example (2.10a) shows that one may choose to describe past acts or opinions in the present tense if they bear some current relevance, i.e., if they are to be made "present". Put in Langacker's terms, past situations can be subjectively construed as located at present time, and in that case the use of present tense is legitimate and appropriate for the speaker's specific communicative purposes. This kind of non-present use of the present tense is justified at considerable length in Langacker's (2001) account of the present tense, in which all the traditional non-present uses of the present tense are considered natural and appropriate in terms of its

definition within the conceptual framework of Cognitive Grammar. According to Langacker, present tense indicates the occurrence of a full instantiation of the profiled process that precisely coincides with the time of speaking.

Langacker (2001) makes the distinction between actual occurrence of situations and virtual occurrence of situations. Speakers of a tensed language have alternative viewing arrangements other than the default one. In a Cognitive Grammar framework, it is such subjective factors as viewing arrangements that provide explanations for obvious mismatches between objective time location relative to the present and actual tense use – as in Example (2.10 a). This subjectivity marks the fundamental difference between the account of tense in Cognitive Grammar and traditional semantic theories of tense.

#### **2.2.4 Harder: The functional approach**

Harder (1997) sets up a general theory of linguistic meaning, which he refers to as Functional Semantics, and uses the tense system to illustrate his theory. The main difference between Harder's functional account and standard accounts is that tenses do not simply stand for time points or spans, as in semantic-representational approaches to tense such as those given in Reichenbach (1947) and Comrie (1985). A central concept in his account is act of reference or point-of-application, which is not tied to the exact nature of the referent (i.e., event time). The point-of-application is defined as a pointing or directing instruction to the addressee as to where to locate the situation in time, but it does not tell them how much of the time line this situation takes up, neither does it tell them where the situation is located with reference to the time of the current speech act. This means that when one talks about something in the past, she does not commit herself with respect to the present, even though in actuality the situation may still hold at the present moment. In other words, the pastness of the past tense and the presentness of the present tense are not part of the situation but of the point-of-application.

#### **2.2.5 Janssen: The non-temporal approach**

Janssen (1990, 1994) proposes that tense is only related to time in a rather remote way. The semantic difference between present and past tenses, just like the difference between the demonstratives *this* and *that*, can be explained in terms of focal/central and disfocal/non-central referential concerns of the speaker. The present tense is used to express the idea that the event referred to is of focal referential concern to the speaker, i.e., closer to the vantage point of the speaker. Conversely, the past tense is used to express the idea that the event at issue is of disfocal referential concern to the speaker, and signals that the speaker is distancing himself from it. In Janssen's treatment, tense shares a great deal of similarity with the demonstratives *this* and *that*. At

any stage of the discourse, the speaker may see himself confronted with the necessity of marking an event as an object of his referential concern and of deciding whether it is central or non-central.

### **2.2.6 Summary**

Despite the long tradition of research on the topic, the linguistic analysis of tense is far from definitive. Existing research has postulated various hypotheses about tense semantics. Many theories capture part of the truth, but are not fully adequate in themselves to explain the differences between the two basic tenses or account for each of their uses. Moreover, the researchers in general do not set out to investigate the nature of tense from a tenseless point of view. As a result, their accounts of tense seem to take the matter on its own merits.

This study favours the cognitive approach to tense where there is no principled distinction between semantics and pragmatics (Evans, Bergen & Zinken, 2006). Semantics has classically been taken to concern the meanings of linguistic expressions without regard for context. Pragmatics, in contrast, has traditionally been defined precisely in terms of the interpretation of a linguistic expression in context. Cognitive semanticists reject the idea that there is a principled distinction between “core” meaning on the one hand, and pragmatic, social or cultural meaning on the other. This means that cognitive semanticists do not make a sharp distinction between semantic and pragmatic knowledge. Knowledge of what linguistic expressions mean and knowledge about how expressions are used are both types of “semantic” knowledge. The past tense, for example, has past time as its basic meaning, but its uses can be extended to certain “hypothetical” situations – elaborations of the basic conceptualizations – inasmuch as “past time” universally has as part of its meaning the notion of remoteness from present reality (Fleischman, 1989). The position taken in this study is that tense meanings should first be explained on the basis of temporal relations rather than the notions like “definiteness”, “distance” or “current relevance”.

## **2.3 Major approaches to L2 tense/aspect acquisition**

SLA researchers have extensively investigated the development of tense and aspect systems in L2 interlanguage (IL). Empirical studies in L2 tense and aspect acquisition have subscribed to different theoretical frameworks and dealt with a wide variety of languages (e.g., Salaberry & Shirai, 2002). In this section, I distinguish and briefly summarise four major approaches to the acquisition of L2 tense (and aspect) in the literature.

The first two approaches, i.e., the concept-oriented approach and the form-oriented approach, have been identified by Bardovi-Harlig (1999, p.345): “two main strands of inquiry can be distinguished: the investigation of the expression of semantic concepts through various linguistic

devices and the investigation of the distribution of verbal morphology as an indicator of the underlying semantic system of interlanguage". The third approach is a more inclusive one that examines the competence difference between near-native speakers and native speakers (e.g., Stutterheim, 2003). The first three approaches characterize different developmental stages in the learner's IL. There are still relatively few studies of advanced learners compared to studies of the early and intermediate stages. Bardovi-Harlig points out that "whereas the field has nearly accomplished the necessary documentation of early to intermediate stages of acquisition ...there are still gaps in our knowledge of advanced stages in most languages" (1999, p.369). The last approach is concerned with L1 conceptual transfer (e.g., Odlin, 2005). This approach is the preferred approach in the present study. Active debate can be found on the role that source language plays in attaining native-like proficiency which goes beyond the acquisition of form.

### **2.3.1 Concept-oriented approach**

The concept-oriented approach aims to examine the full range of linguistic devices employed by L2 learners to express a concept like temporality. L2 expression of temporality is clearly not restricted to morphological markers of tense and aspect. Different types of coding principles, including pragmatics, lexis and morphosyntax, all contribute to temporal reference.

The most comprehensive study in this line of research is the large-scale project conducted by Dietrich, Klein & Noyau (1995). The framework is proposed by Klein (1994). It was found that the general developmental path for L2 learners in a natural learning environment was from pragmatic strategies to lexical expressions and finally to the morphological marking of temporal meanings. Not every untutored learner could reach the last stage. This study, however, is not focused on the later stages of acquisition when advanced learners have fully developed the various devices their target language offers to express temporality.

### **2.3.2 Form-oriented approach**

The form-oriented approach is concerned with what might be considered the final stage of the concept-oriented approach, i.e., the acquisition of the grammatical forms of tense-aspect marking. It aims to describe and explain the distributional pattern of tense-aspect morphology characteristic of different stages of the L2 interlanguage.

A number of linguistic factors have been postulated to account for the distributional features in learners' production. The Saliency Hypothesis (e.g., Wolfram, 1985) claims that phonological salience guides the distribution of simple past morphology. The more phonetically dissimilar the present and past tense forms of a verb (such as suppletives and copulas) are, the more likely they will be marked for tense. The Aspect Hypothesis (e.g., Andersen & Shirai, 1994), the most widely



tested hypothesis in L2 tense-aspect research, states that verbal morphology initially develops to encode inherent lexical aspect rather than grammatical aspect or tense. L2 Learners acquire past tense marking with achievement and accomplishment verbs first, followed by activity and state verbs. The Discourse Hypothesis (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 1995) proposes that learners tend to use emerging temporal morphology to distinguish foreground information from background information. As can be seen, the different linguistic constraints outlined above are not exclusively temporal. I will narrow down the review to empirical studies on L1-Chinese learners.

Yang and Huang (2004) investigated what impact a tenseless L1 may have on the acquisition of the English tense system by Chinese learners. In a cross-sectional design, learners of five different proficiency levels were asked to narrate some memorable personal experience or a news story. It was found that a) Classroom instruction may force an early start of tense use. b) The Chinese way of expressing temporality may reinforce the learners' initial tendencies of relying on pragmatic and lexical devices to indicate temporal locations. c) The early start of tense use and the L1 reinforcement of the learners' initial tendencies result in an extended period during which the learner's expression of temporality exhibits a very slow shift from depending on pragmatic and lexical devices to depending more on grammatical devices.

Xu (2003) reported two cross-sectional studies on the acquisition of English past tense morphology by Chinese EFL learners, with the focus on testing the predications of the Aspect Hypothesis. Both studies used short cloze passages where participants were asked to fill in the blanks by using the correct forms of the bare verbs. The results support the predications of the Aspect Hypothesis in general and the effect of lexical aspect was found trivial to learners of higher proficiency level. It was also found that the stative copula *be* favoured prototypical past context (single unitary events in the past) over non-prototypical past context (repeated, habitual past events). The role of the L1 aspectual system, esp. the perfective marker *-le*, was discussed.

In addition to linguistic constraints, social and affective factors are also taken into account in SLA under the influence of variationist sociolinguistics. For example, L2 tense/aspect production may be affected by learners' accommodation to the interlocutor or emotional investment in the topic (Bayley, 1991). All these variables and their interaction with the general contributing factors in SLA such as the role of learners' L1, proficiency level, task type and input makes L2 tense/aspect acquisition a truly multi-faceted, complex phenomenon.

### **2.3.3 Competence-oriented approach**

The third approach focuses on the stage of ultimate attainment. Neither of the first two approaches to tense and aspect acquisition directly addresses the issue of whether L2 learners really

know what the target T/A morphology stands for. In recent years there has been an increasing interest in advanced stages of second language acquisition and discussions of near-native competence, or what is considered as having successfully acquired a second language. The competence-oriented approach explicitly addresses the question of whether the particular population, i.e., advanced language learners, can ever attain truly native competence, particularly in “cognitive” or “functional” aspect of grammar (Coppetiers, 1987).

Unlike studies in the previous two approaches which do not distinguish between learners’ performance and competence, this approach is focused on competence only. There is a clear need to make this distinction in the context of second language acquisition<sup>10</sup>. As it happens, sometimes the inappropriate uses in learners’ production should be properly categorized as online mistakes as opposed to errors. These mistakes are most likely to be caused by time pressure, which can be recognized and corrected afterwards by learners themselves, therefore do not truly represent learners’ underlying grammar.

Studies following the competence-oriented approach are relatively limited in number, the three major sources being Coppetiers (1987), Montrul & Slabakova (2003) and Slabakova & Montrul (2002). These studies investigated the interpretations that NSs and NNSs assigned to sentences containing verbs with aspectual contrasts (the languages in focus were French and Spanish). Mixed findings were reported. Coppetiers (1987) found markedly divergent intuitions between NSs and near-native speakers with respect to *imparfait* and *passé composé*, the two past tenses in French. By contrast, Slabakova & Montrul (2002) and Montrul & Slabakova (2003) concluded that near-native learners could attain (true) NS competence with respect to the *Preterite* and *Imperfect* distinction in Spanish. We attribute the apparent conflict in these results to different methods adopted by researchers (The former used extensive interviewing whereas the latter used sentence conjunction judgement tasks.)

Some studies (Hendriks, 2005) in the European research project “The structure of learner varieties” address the factors that distinguish very advanced learners from native speakers and investigate the difficulties which arise at the final thresholds of advanced L2 acquisition with respect to aspect and temporal structure. Comparative study was conducted with respect to specific grammaticized categories, investigating the extent to which grammaticized means determine organization principles underlying information structure and event construal in complex communicative tasks (e.g., Stutterheim, 2003; Stutterheim & Carroll, 2006). The results show that

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<sup>10</sup> I am aware that usage-based models of grammar (e.g., Langacker, 1987) hold that there is no principled distinction between knowledge of language and use of language (competence and performance in general terms) since knowledge emerges from use. That is, mental grammar of the speaker (his or her knowledge of language) is formed by the abstraction of symbolic units from instances of language use. Also see Taylor (1988) for a detailed discussion of the meaning and use of the term “competence” in linguistics and applied linguistics.

the principles in question are both perspective driven and linked to patterns of grammaticalization. Therefore advanced learners who have acquired a very high level of formal proficiency in the target language do not fully acquire the underlying principles, which are based on grammaticized means, when structuring information for expression.

The issue of ultimate attainment still remains an open question, calling for serious empirical investigations. In the present study, deviance has been shown (see Section 1.2) between advanced Chinese learners of English and NSs with regard to the use and interpretation of the English present and past simple tenses. It appears that highly proficient learners have grown out of universal constraints proposed by existing hypotheses as described by the Aspect Hypothesis and Discourse Hypothesis. Language specific factors such as cross-linguistic differences, especially the specific combination of L1-L2 combinations should deserve attention.

### **2.3.4 L1 conceptual transfer**

One proposed explanation for the deviant tense behaviours of advanced Chinese learners (i.e., deviant from NS tense usage) may be found in the notion of transfer, more specifically the type of conceptual transfer proposed by researchers like Jarvis (1998, 2000, 2011), Jarvis & Pavlenko (2008), Odlin (2005), Pavlenko (1999, 2011), Ringbom (1987), Slobin (1991, 1996). L1 conceptual transfer assumes language-specific differences at the conceptual level – differences in concepts or patterns of conceptualization – between speakers of different languages. It is argued that these conceptually-rooted differences “carry over” from the L1 in the course of L2 acquisition. Slobin (1991) has argued that the grammatical categories that are most susceptible to influence from the first language are the language-specific categories such as tense and aspect, which contribute at a deep level to the specific mode of “thinking for speaking” in one’s first language. This L1-specific mode of thinking for speaking is very difficult to reset for adult learners. Successful acquisition of the L2 grammar often requires a conceptual leap, i.e., revision of basic semantic/pragmatic concepts.

Jarvis (2007) makes the distinction between two types of conceptual transfer – concept transfer and conceptualization transfer. While concepts refer to representations that are stored in the mind (presumably in long-term memory), conceptualization is the process of selecting individual concepts and organizing them together (presumably in working memory) in a way that reflects a particular perspective on a specific situation. Consequently, conceptual transfer refers to cross-linguistic effects arising from differences in the structure or internal make-up of the concepts stored in the minds of speakers of different languages, conceptualization transfer refers to cross-linguistic effects arising not from different concepts, but from differences concerning which concepts are

selected and how they are organized in a particular conceptualization of a specific situation or event.

Conceptual transfer has attracted a rapidly growing number of studies, emerging as a recent popular sub-area in the study of crosslinguistic influence (Jarvis, 2011). The most common concepts under investigation so far have been spatial, temporal, and affective concepts (Odlin, 2005). The temporal focus can be found in work being carried on by a group of European researchers, albeit using somewhat different terms and frameworks such as organization principles and information structure (Stutterheim, 2003; Stutterheim, Carroll, & Klein, 2003; Stutterheim, Carroll, & Klein, 2009; Stutterheim & Lambert, 2005; Stutterheim & Nüse, 2003). A special focus is placed on the link between aspectual preferences and underlying differences in conceptualization between speakers of different languages (e.g., Schmiedtová, & Flecken, 2008; Stutterheim, Carroll, & Klein, 2009). This study follows their use of the term “event construal”.

Over the years there have been various attempts to demonstrate empirically the influence of L1 concepts on L2 tense acquisition. Coppetiers (1987, p.560-561) found that “the NNSs’ perceptions of tense meanings were strongly affected by tense meanings in the L1 so that the speakers of Romance languages interpreted the meanings of French tenses differently from speakers of Germanic and tenseless languages”. Coppetiers also argued that speakers of tenseless languages, such as Chinese and Indonesian, employ tenses in an L2 differently than do speakers of Romance and Germanic languages. The results from Hinkel (1992) indicated that the very fact that Spanish and Arabic have deictic time reference provides an established conceptual structure and morphological temporal reference which the speakers of these languages can draw on when exposed to L2 conceptualizations of time and morphological tense. To some degree, speakers of Spanish and Arabic seemed to share their conceptualizations of time with NSs of English and were more successful in picking out appropriate L2 time attributes than speakers of Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese.

Conceptual transfer is a factor essentially distinct from the various and somewhat varied constraints described earlier. As we have just mentioned, a tacit presumption of conceptual transfer is that there are cognitive differences among speakers of different languages. Arguments both for and against this assumption can be seen as part of a larger debate between universalists and variationists in cognitive psychology. If the presumption is valid, what, then, may cause the differences at the conceptual level? The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis postulates the effect of language on thoughts. Conceptual transfer theory thus sits at the intersection between SLA and theories of linguistic relativity.

### 2.3.5 Summary

On the whole SLA research has little to say about the four types of English tense usage under investigation, let alone about the difficulties experienced in comprehending and acquiring such uses by speakers of languages other than English in an EFL or ESL context. In this thesis I set out to explicate the source(s) of the difficulties experienced by speakers of Chinese, a tenseless language, in interpreting and acquiring such specific extended uses of the English past and present tenses. Empirical investigation is thus crucial in order to understand how native English speakers and advanced Chinese learners of English use and interpret such extended uses of tense, especially the underlying cognitive and communicative factors for making particular tense choices. NS behaviour will provide a normative baseline against which L2 tense uses and interpretations are compared.

This study hopes to contribute to the extensive body of research in L2 tense acquisition in the following three ways. Firstly, it looks at the relatively less studied cohort of advanced learners. Advanced level EFL/ESL is an ill-documented area in the field of tense-aspect research. I will explore whether or to what extent competence differences exist between native speakers and advanced Chinese learners of English.

Secondly, this study examines the acquisition of L2 tense by learners from a tenseless L1. Research on learners with a tenseless L1 is relatively sparse (e.g., Guiora, 1983; Hinkel, 1992). Some studies have been devoted to identifying the causes of errors in the uses of tense and aspect by L1-Chinese learners (e.g., Cai, 2004; Xu, 2005; Yang & Huang, 2004). Whether speakers of the many languages without morphological tenses can ever fully master the English verbal system of tenses is an issue that has not been sufficiently investigated or determined (Hinkel, 1992). The present study aims to help fill this gap. It finds a typological niche in that the grammatical category in question is obligatory in the target language and absent in the source language. In the framework of L1 transfer, the study investigates the interaction between the typological make-up of the source language and target language.

Thirdly, this study is interested in the learning problems associated with the distinction between English simple present and past tenses, rather than that between the present perfect and the simple past. The latter has attracted a great deal of scholarly interest whereas the former has received relatively little attention.

SLA research and tense studies have traditionally been seen as separate fields. The findings from language acquisition research may facilitate our understanding of the nature of tense as they add an empirical dimension to the theoretical discussions of tense. The investigation of L2 tense

knowledge in learners with a tenseless L1 may ultimately tell us something about the role of tense in the overall cognitive schema of speakers of a tensed language.

## **2.4 The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis: An overview**

The essential idea of linguistic relativity is “the relationship question” (Nuyts & Pederson, 1999), that is, the relation between language and thought. The linguistic relativity hypothesis (LRH) claims that the particular language we speak can affect or influence the way we think about reality. For some years this was known as the Whorfian hypothesis, because of its modern association with the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956); or, alternatively, as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, since Whorf first encountered these ideas in the teachings of Edward Sapir. However, this is not a new idea. Over the centuries, this issue has evoked perennial fascination and intense controversy among philosophers, linguists, anthropologists, psychologists and more recently cognitive scientists. In the second half of the twentieth century, the theory of linguistic relativity was the object of scepticism and ridicule. But it has received wide acknowledgement in the last two decades and empirical support for it is increasing (Lucy, 1996; Boroditsky, 2011). The academic interest in the LRH has generated recent attention from the general public as well. Interested readers may consult the Dec 2010 online debate of “the Economist” magazine between cognitive psychologist Lera Boroditsky and linguist Mark Liberman<sup>11</sup>.

In the following, I will present the core premise and two basic tenets of the LRH, focusing on explicating the intricacies and subtleties expressed by the various definitions along with criticisms from opposing paradigms (Section 2.4.1). I will then briefly summarize and analyse critically the state of art of the LRH research in the light of recent developments from empirical field, especially psycholinguistic experiments related to the temporal domain (Section 2.4.2).

### **2.4.1 Review of linguistic relativity theories**

This section is not intended to clarify what Whorf and Sapir really said (cf., Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1990), nor to provide a thorough historical review of how contravening intellectual positions contended in a swing of philosophical currents (For detailed reviews of the historical background, see Gentner & Goldin, 2003; Gumperz & Levinson, 1996; Lucy, 1992). This section examines the characteristics of various expressions used to state the linguistic relativity thesis and interprets their implications. In doing so, I hope to be able to identify the complexities of its theoretical landscape,

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<sup>11</sup> For detailed information, visit <http://www.economist.com/debate/overview/190>

more importantly, to delineate certain specific claims of the LRH which this study may either directly address or bear on.

The fundamental premise behind linguistic relativism is the very existence of semantic diversity across human languages. Languages around the world vary considerably in the information they convey. Each particular language requires very different things from its speakers. For example, every finite sentence in English has to encode tense, that is, the temporal relation between the event referred to some “temporal anchor” (Klein, 2008) whereas sentences in Chinese are non-finite and in many cases, time-neutral. This assumption of linguistic diversity contrasts starkly with the universalist school. The generative tradition asserts what are perceived as differences between specific languages are merely surface phenomena and do not affect cognitive processes that are universal to all human beings (Chomsky, 1965).

Two tenets of linguistic relativism are (i) there are important language-specific effects on cognitive processes, therefore (ii) people speaking different languages experience and conceive the world differently (Wolff & Holmes, 2011). These claims also run counter to the universalist perspective which holds that language and cognition are separate and human conceptual structures are the same.

The central proposition of linguistic relativity is generally understood as having two different versions: the strong version – “linguistic determinism” and the weak version – “linguistic relativism”. The strong version of the LRH stipulates that language *determines* thought. It claims that speakers’ thoughts can never be free from the constraints imposed by the language they speak. The weak version postulates that language *influences* thought and certain kinds of behaviour. The specific structure of a language influences its speakers’ habitual thought, including routine ways of attending to, categorizing, and remembering objects and events (Lucy, 1992). The strong version is now generally dismissed as monocausal and deterministic. The weak version, in its varied formulations, is espoused by many linguists. Slobin’s (1991, 1996) thinking-for-speaking hypothesis, for example, has been very influential.

The thinking-for-speaking hypothesis focuses on “the influence of language on the kind of thinking that goes on, online, while we are using the language” (Cadierno, 2010, p.1). It is regarded as a “weaker” version of the LRH as the claim is restricted to effects on language-mediated cognition only – the online mental processing involved in our linguistic rendering of the state of affairs. By online process of converting thoughts into words is meant the kind of processes in which perceptual data and other kinds of prelinguistic cognition are translated into linguistic terms for the purpose of communicating them to others. The thinking-for-speaking hypothesis and other similar formulations (such as thinking-for-listening and thinking-for-writing) may be

conceived as a narrow construal of linguistic relativity effects. However, the thinking-for-speaking hypothesis is sometimes viewed not to be a genuine case of linguistic relativity. Pinker (1995), the universalist, contends that starting and ending with language renders the argument of the thinking-for-speaking hypothesis circular. Odlin (2005) and other relativists (e.g., Lucy, 1996) also state explicitly that the effects of linguistic relativity should be tested on non-verbal performance.

It is not at all clear, however, whether the effects articulated in the thinking-for-speaking hypothesis are purely linguistic. Theoretical insights from the perspective of cognitive development imply that linguistic influences on thinking for speaking lie at the heart of the LRH. Research has found that human conceptual development and linguistic development are closely coupled from as early as the age of two (Bowerman & Levinson, 2001). Language influences thinking by instilling cognitive habits. Learners gradually learn to selectively attend or disattend to different aspects of a scene or an event during the particular mental process of thinking for speaking as required by particular categories and distinction existing in their first language. If one's attention to a semantic domain is always heightened, then this is surely a pervasive and general effect beyond strict linguistic cognition.

Apart from the effect upon thinking-for-speaking, it has been proposed that language may exert various effects upon different aspects of our thoughts in widely differing ways. Gentner & Goldin (2003), for example, advance the proposition that "language can act as a lens through which we see the world; it can provide us with tools that enlarge our capacities; it can help us appreciate groupings in the world that we might not have otherwise grasped" (p.12). The scope of linguistic relativity research is hence widened enormously when construed as varied mechanisms at work.

"The relationship question" is not one question but many. The notion of linguistic relativity is often defined as the hypothesized influence of language on thought. At least three elements in this expression are worthy of closer scrutiny. Whether language has an impact on thought not only depends on (i) how we define language and (ii) how we define thought but also depends on (iii) what we take to be the criterion for "having an impact on". Gumperz & Levinson (1996) point out that both of the two crucial terms – language and thought – are "global cover terms, not notions of any precision. When one tries to make anything definite out of the idea of linguistic relativity, one inevitably has to focus on particular aspects of each of these terms in the relation, ... each can be differently construed and, as a consequence, the relation reconsidered"(p.2).

Relativists themselves differ in their opinions about what exactly constitutes linguistic relativity. Lakoff (1987) has identified four parameters which categorize different opinions among researchers, for example, whether to view the locus of linguistic relativity as being in the language or in the mind. In the following, I will show that prior discussions about "the relativity debate" have employed many different expressions. They are characterized by a broad range of definitions



of each of the three elements aforementioned, indicating varied conceptions of the language-thought relation.

Expressions used in relation to “language” sometimes denote general “*linguistic systems*” or “*language differences*”, sometimes explicate different aspects of language and therefore reveal respective research interests. Some expressions use “*grammatical categories*” or “*structural differences*” with a focus on obligatory elements of language; some use “*vocabulary items*” or “*major lexical patterns*” with a focus on specific content words or constructions; still others use “*habitual use*” with a focus on the pragmatic use of language. The influence of grammatical categories is generally believed to be a more important determinant of thought than the categorizations of the lexicon by virtue of their obligatoriness, repetition, unconscious nature. Whorf, in one of his strongest statements, proposed that: “Users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars towards different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world”(1956, p. 221). Lucy (1997, p.292) distinguishes three levels of language in the linguistic relativity proposal: the semiotic level concerns how speaking any natural language (a symbolic system vs. an iconic-indexical system) at all may influence thinking; the structural level concerns how speaking one or more particular natural languages (e.g., Chinese vs. English) may influence thinking; the functional level (e.g., schooled vs. vernacular) concerns whether using language in a particular way may influence thinking.

Expressions used in relation to “thought” are often hedged in loose, vague terms. To give a few examples, “*how people perceive / conceptualize / view / see / experience / understand / interpret / make sense of / look at / think about / talk about the world and behave in it*”, “*the way in which people think, and especially their classification of the experienced world*”, “*how people experience the world and how people express that experience*”. These thought-related expressions largely fit into two levels: the micro level (i.e., perceptual/cognitive processes) and the macro level (i.e., social/cultural worldviews). On the micro, or cognitive level, the emphasis is on whether linguistic differences necessarily induce real (neuro-) cognitive differences in the ways our brain perceives, processes, stores and recalls information. On the macro, or anthropological level, the point is to evaluate to what extent various worldviews (e.g., physical, ontological and social worldviews) are affected by available linguistic resources.

Expressions used in relation to the degree and depth of linguistic relativity effects also differ widely. They can vary in magnitude, ranging from a set of predicates that bear strong causal effect connotations, such as “*determine*”, “*decide*”, “*yield*”, “*cause*”, “*limit*”, “*restrict*”, “*constrain*”, “*profoundly/dramatically shape*”, “*structure*”, “*mold*”, to predicates that bear weaker connotations,

such as “influence”, “affect”, “impart”, “suggest”, “condition”, “impose”, “predispose”, “anchor”, “induce”, “instill” and “cue”. Some expressions are associated with a binding power, such as “restrict” and “limit”, while others with a facilitating power, such as “channel” and “impart”.

Moreover, linguistic relativism can be viewed in a broader framework termed as “cultural relativism” (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996). Culture, through language, influences thought. Under this broader framework, it is believed that the life ways and point of views of a people are clearly mirrored in their language. The effect of language is thus seen as part of cultural relativity which hypothesizes that different cultures entail different points of view. Nisbett & Masuda (2003), for example, provides a detailed discussion of how East Asians and Westerners perceive the world and think about it in very different ways. Language hence contains the key to understanding the differing world views of peoples.

Finally, an oft-repeated question posed to challenge the LRH is the chicken-or-egg question: which comes first, thought or language? In Western intellectual and philosophical discussions there is a longstanding view of thought coming before language. It is important to recognize, however, the chicken-and-egg question does not bear a direct causal relation to the validity of the LRH. It does not negate the possibility that language impacts thought if thought comes before language. Furthermore, the influence between language and thought does not have to be just in one direction. Our language and thought is interrelated: the way we think influences the way we speak, and the way we think also influences the way we speak, which is not hard to understand since much of our lives is spent in language-related activities. The coupling of language and thought is therefore very natural. Boroditsky (2011) points out that the theory of linguistic relativity yields fascinating insights into the origins of human knowledge and the construction of reality, as put nicely as follows:

*A hallmark feature of human intelligence is its adaptability, the ability to invent and rearrange conceptions of the world to suit changing goals and environments. One consequence of this flexibility is the great diversity of languages that have emerged around the globe. Each provides its own cognitive toolkit and encapsulates the knowledge and worldview developed over thousands of years within a culture. Each contains a way of perceiving, categorizing and making meaning in the world, an invaluable guidebook developed and honed by our ancestors. Research into how the languages we speak shape the way we think is helping scientists to unravel how we create knowledge and construct reality and how we got to be as smart and sophisticated as we are. And this insight, in turn, helps us understand the very essence of what makes us human (p.65).*

### **2.4.2 Review of empirical investigations into the linguistic relativity hypothesis**

Most early arguments regarding the Whorfian question were purely speculative in nature. Some, in the anthropological tradition, drew upon evidence from anecdotal examples based on “little peoples” and “little languages”. In the 1950s, researchers reformulated the hypothesis as testable hypotheses and set out to prove or disprove experimentally the existence of linguistic relativity effects (for analysis and review of earlier empirical research see Lucy 1996). In more recent years, the linguistic relativity hypothesis has become an arena of active investigation where experiments are advanced at a rapid pace (for a recent review see Boroditsky, 2011).

In the past, empirical tests of the relativity question did not prove convincingly to either side in the debate. Both sorts of evidence favouring and disfavouring the LRH were available, making the status of the hypothesis equivocal. Current research continues to find mixed results. Close debates on specific issues can be found in some of the most successful attempts to investigate the hypothesis (see Li & Gleitman, 2002 and Levinson, Kita, Haun & Rasch, 2002; also Boroditsky, 2001 and January & Kako, 2007).

Some findings claiming in support of the LRH have been questioned. One possible weakness may be ascribed to misconceived linguistic facts, e.g., the ill-informed analysis of the Chinese hypothetical construction in Bloom (1979). Another weakness commonly found in empirical investigations of the hypothesis lies in conceptually flawed methodology. In view of existing methodological problems in the field, Lucy (1996) suggests that serious empirical work should meet certain minimal requirements:

- 1) Contrastive linguistic analysis of two or more languages;
- 2) A grammatical or major lexical pattern is investigated;
- 3) There are language-independent explorations of relevant aspects of cognition.

The first criterion emphasizes the importance of cross-linguistic comparison, including both typologically close and distant languages. The comparison across languages should also be considered in conformity with the structuralist view of language that the meaning and function of one form depends that of the other forms with which it is in opposition in the system. The second criterion stresses the effort to analyse a widespread grammatical or lexical pattern rather than relying on a small set of words. The last criterion highlights the assessment of non-verbal performance as a prerequisite for work under the framework of linguistic relativity. That is, serious investigations should correlate linguistic phenomena directly to non-linguistic phenomena so as to show more pervasive and broader effects of language.

Nonetheless, studies in tune with the thinking-for-speaking hypothesis begin with language and end, via cognition, with language. As argued in Section 2.4.1, this line of empirical research also contributes to the study of language-thought linkage and their contribution should not be undermined in our view. In the following, I will survey both types of studies which involve linguistic and non-linguistic tasks.

Lucy (1997) has classified existing empirical approaches into three main strands, namely, “behaviour-centred” approaches, “structure-centred” approaches and “domain-centred” approaches. Behaviour-centred approaches begin with some practical concern, e.g., occupational accidents depicted in Whorf’s famous example of empty barrels, and seek an explanation in language. Linguistic behaviour (including both comprehension and production) certainly constitutes a subtype of human behaviour. Marked differences between L2 learners, even very advanced learners, and native speakers are not uncommon. SLA researchers come to believe that many seemingly inexplicable difficulties encountered in L2 learning may have their roots in different patterns of thought which in turn arise from language practices.

Structure-centred approaches start with an observed difference between languages in their semantic structure and go on to examine the possible ramifications for thought and behaviour. For example, Tai (2003) analysed the resultative construction in Chinese. He suggested that pending further psychological evidence, it appears that Chinese speakers attend relatively more to the result of an event, whereas English speakers attend more to the process of an event. Studies adopting structure-centred approaches, however, may have difficulty providing rigorous demonstrations of linguistic relativity effects. They are often deductively interpretative in character therefore fail to present real proof for the crucial language-thought linkage. For example, Scollon & Scollon (1991) concluded that we cannot learn anything about the differences between Western ways of thinking and Chinese thought by studying mass and count nouns in Chinese and English. Scollon & Scollon provided an ingenious reasoning based on the linguistic facts in Hopi and English (Whorf, 1956) and Chinese and English (Hansen, 1983) which led to incompatible Whorfian arguments.

Domain-centred approaches begin with a certain domain of experienced reality such as space and time and ask how various natural languages encode or construe it. Languages across the world differ in substantial and often surprising, if not staggering, ways, with regard to semantic structures encoding these domains. One traditional and controversial domain under intense scrutiny is colour perception. Studies on colour terms and restudies correcting methodological flaws have found significant language effects on memory and perceptual categorization (e.g., Rosch & Lloyd, 1978). Another semantic domain which has proven fruitful for studies of linguistic relativity is the domain of space. The large scale spatial relations project led by the Max Plank Institute for psycholinguistics has found variations in spatial cognition as a function of two major spatial

orientations across languages (e.g., Pederson *et al.* 1998). The study of motion perception is another classic domain. Slobin (2004) and Talmy (1991), the leading scholars in this line of research, have identified the effects of a binary typology in encoding motion events (i.e., verb framing and satellite framing). The domains of number and gender marking are also under extensive investigation.

Temporal cognition is one important aspect of thought. Unlike colour perception, temporality is a high-level domain as it is most pertinent to our conceptualization and description of events. Obviously there are many differences in how languages encode temporal meanings as manifested in conceptions of time in spatial terms and grammaticalized temporal categories. Researchers have found a great diversity of obligatory grammatical categories across languages. Some languages are tense-prominent while others are aspect-prominent. Slobin (1996) argues that temporal location and contour of events are conceptually abstract notions which are not obvious to sensory experience. They cannot be experienced directly in our perceptual, sensorimotor, and practical dealings with the world. Therefore, they are not categories of thought in general but categories of thinking for speaking. Distinctions of aspect, for example, are distinctions that can only be learned through language, and have no other use except to be expressed in language.

Boroditsky and her lab at Stanford University have recently produced voluminous studies on the linguistic effects on temporal cognition. In Boroditsky (2001) she found that Mandarin speakers are more likely to think about time vertically while English speakers tend to represent time horizontally. The results are in line with the preferred patterns of spatiotemporal metaphors in Mandarin and English. Fuhrman *et al.* (2011) confirmed and extended these findings. In another study, Fuhrman & Boroditsky (2010) found that different writing directions in English (which reads from left to right) and Hebrew (which reads from right to left) had an effect on the way their speakers arranged pictures depicting temporal sequences of natural events. In Boroditsky, Ham & Ramscar (2002), cross-linguistic differences in memory and similarity judgements were found between speakers of English (a tensed language) and Indonesian (a tenseless language).

### **2.4.3 Summary**

Recent years have seen an outburst of empirical studies using various indigenous demonstrations with native speakers of different languages, bi (or multi)-lingual speakers (e.g., Pavlenko, 1999, 2011) and second language learners (e.g., Han & Cadierno, 2010). To elicit real cognitive differences in speakers of different languages, some studies use methodologically rigorous psycholinguistic experiments in which no language is involved at all or language is only used covertly. These tasks typically conform to the gold standard of psycholinguistic studies, e.g.,

sorting artefact into categories, making similarity judgements, using the implicit measure of reaction time to recording eye movements. There are also studies (e.g., Chafe, 1980) which used language-based tasks such as elicited narration or recalled event reports that are based on a set of pictures or a silent film. The latter is often carried out in the context of SLA and framed within the framework of conceptual transfer (Odlin, 2005), which examines the influence of language-mediated conceptual categories of L1 on the learners' verbal performance in L2. Other studies combine both linguistic and non-linguistic tasks. Papafragou *et al.* (2008), for example, found that attention allocation during motion perception is not affected by the perceiver's native language and effects of language arise only when linguistic forms are recruited to achieve the task to commit facts to memory. These studies show that conceptual structure and semantic structure are closely coupled especially when we speak.

Despite the growing body of evidence which is suggestive of the existence of linguistic relativity effects, empirical research into the impact of grammar on temporal cognition and experience is needed in the context of SLA. Languages across the world offer a wide range of means to express temporal and aspectual distinctions. More studies should focus on the cognitive/experiential aspects underlying cross-linguistic/typological differences, particularly differences in grammaticalized temporal categories.

The question of the significance of language differences for thought must begin with a consideration of the general role and significance of language in human life (Lucy, 1996). In the next chapter, I will describe in detail the function of language from the cognitive linguistics perspective.

## Chapter 3 Conceptual and Methodological Framework

Chapter 3 addresses theoretical and methodological issues. Section 3.1 introduces the Cognitive Linguistics framework and elucidates a number of key concepts such as category and construal. Section 3.2 provides a contrastive analysis of English and Chinese temporal systems. Section 3.3 proposes the root of the conceptual problem that confronts advanced Chinese learners in L2 English tense acquisition. Finally, Section 3.4 describes the methodological framework developed in this study.

### 3.1 Theory orientation

This study was built upon one of the fundamental premises of Cognitive Linguistics, that is, grammar is conceptualization (Langacker, 1999). A central position is given by the cognitive camp to the relation between grammar and conceptualization. The way people conceptualize any given situation in the world is directly associated with the grammatical structures of language. Tense belongs to core grammar. The cognitive approach proves to be a promising perspective to investigate the nature of tense and tense usage.

#### 3.1.1 The cognitive linguistics framework

Cognitive Linguistics (CL) is a flexible framework rather than a single, closely articulated theory of language (Geeraerts, 2006). The CL enterprise constitutes a cluster of many partially overlapping approaches, notably Cognitive Grammar Theory (Langacker, 1987, 1991, 2008), Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), Force Dynamics Theory (Talmy, 2000), Mental Spaces Theory (Fauconnier, 1994), Frame Semantics Theory (Fillmore, 1982), and a set of theories collectively known as *construction grammars* (e.g., Goldberg, 1995, 2006). All these theories share a common set of basic concepts which form the conceptual cornerstones of the theoretical framework of Cognitive Linguistics. As we shall see, one of these basic concepts which is of particular importance to the present study is construal. I will explain its notion in detail in Section 3.1.2.2.

Arising out of dissatisfaction with formal approaches to language, CL clearly rejects the autonomous view of language as a purely formal, algorithmic system in its deep structure, being processed in a separate language faculty independent of other non-linguistic cognitive abilities. Instead, CL postulates that language should be studied as a manifestation of general cognitive principles. Thus language offers a window into cognitive function and thereby contains the key to understanding human mind.

### ***3.1.1.1 Research goals of CL***

A fundamental assumption of Cognitive Linguistics is that language forms an integral part of cognition. Following from this basic assumption, different languages reflect different patterns of conceptualization. This integrated view of language and cognition brings along two main goals within CL research which are interrelated to each other. Firstly, CL endeavours to develop a cognitively plausible account of language. CL's emphasis on the relation of language to general cognitive principles gives rise to a distinct view from other linguistic approaches with regard to the nature of language and how to describe it. Most modern linguists, be it formalists or functionalists, would at least pay lip service to the idea that the study of language is a "cognitive" discipline (Taylor, 2002), where the term "cognitive" is used in the original sense of the word, i.e., "related to knowledge". Insofar as people are able to speak and understand their language, they must have the proper knowledge representations in their minds that allow them to do so. In this sense, the study of language is no doubt of a mental nature. Nevertheless, the term "cognitive" is understood differently in CL. To recognize or to assert that language knowledge resides in the minds of its speakers is not sufficient for a linguistic theory to count as CL (Taylor, 2002). An important criterion for judging a truly cognitive model of language is whether it is psychologically plausible. CL is firmly committed to the idea that language knowledge should be embedded in what is known about human cognition in general. What cognitive linguists are trying to do as linguists is to describe how general cognitive abilities and processes in the mind enable people to create and understand linguistic expressions.

As its second main goal, CL strives to contribute to the study of human mind through language. Cognitive science – the study of mind and its workings – is an interdisciplinary field, embracing philosophy, psychology, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, linguistics, and anthropology. As a unique human endowment, language renders itself a very important venue to investigate what cognition is, what it does and how it works. There are different perspectives from which a cognitive linguist can look at the human mind. Many theories in CL (e.g., Pecher & Zwaan, 2005) are trying to explore how basic cognitive systems and mechanisms such as memory, categorization, attention and perception are used during language behaviour. Neural underpinnings of language and cognition have had longstanding influence on the character and content of cognitive linguistic theories (Evans, Bergen, & Zinken, 2007). Neurocognitive linguistics (e.g., Lamb, 1999) aims to understand how the brain works by probing linguistic structure as it is represented in the neuronal structure. Also if we accept the notion of representation and representational theories of mind (Sternberg & Mio, 2009), CL ascribes a great deal of importance to the interdependence between linguistic (semantic) representation and conceptual representation.



Many leading cognitive linguists (e.g. Talmy) go so far as to regard linguistic analyses as specific hypotheses about the contents of the mind.

Some scholars, nevertheless, call for caution against the practice of equating semantic structures with conceptual structures and question its underlying assumption. Levinson (1999), for example, argues that despite their close interrelatedness, semantic representation is distinct from conceptual representation due to their respective inherent characteristics. Besides, it seems that not all thoughts are formulated in a propositional form that language takes. The way mathematicians, artists and chess players think, for instance, do not necessarily take propositional forms. The argument of thinking without words (e.g., Bermúdez, 2003) suggests that linguistic conceptualization is a subset of the full set of mental representations in our minds.

### ***3.1.1.2 The relationship between language, mind and experience***

CL also pays special attention to the complex relationship between language, mind and human experience. In particular, it stresses the role of human experience in cognition which is termed as “embodied cognition”. The discussion of phenomenology has a long tradition in cognitive science (Petitot, 1999). The philosophical ideology underlying this phenomenological tradition is the empiricist belief that knowledge derives from experience. As such, minds are not to be taken as autonomous entities but rather as embedded in the larger reality of human experience. The totality of our experience consists of physical (bodily), psychological and social (including historical and cultural) experiences since we not only live in the physical world but also in the social and psychological world (Levinson, 1999). These experiences can be personal, subjective, and idiosyncratic on one hand, and general, communal and shared on the other.

CL hence stresses that the study of language must take experience into account. Since the concepts underlying linguistic expressions are not products of insular minds, the study of language should be based on our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it (Ungerer & Schmid, 1996). It is believed in CL that language reflects and presents generalizations about phenomena in the world as its speakers experience them, as opposed to entities that inhere in the objectively real world.

Talmy (2000) takes cognitive semantics as a branch of phenomenology. In cognitive semantics, meaning is identified as the conceptualization associated with linguistic expressions (Langacker, 2008). In line with the phenomenal approach, conceptualization as a mental phenomenon is further grounded in physical reality as well as social interaction. Put in different terms, conceptualization is “embodied” in the double sense that we see our bodies both as physical

structures providing the context or milieu of cognitive mechanisms and as lived, experiential structures highly interactive with the environment (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991).

An adequate characterization of the relationship between language, experience and thinking should also incorporate the role of language in interpreting experiences. These language-based interpretations in turn influence our thoughts (Lucy, 1997). The critical function of language in human life, as CL sees it, is not merely to mirror the concepts in our minds or reflect our experience. Instead, the status of language is extended to one of several tools used by humans to experience the world. CL sees language as an essential aspect of the conceptual apparatus through which we apprehend and engage the world. A broad spectrum of contemporary linguistics, e.g., systemic functional grammar, also views language as “the foundation of human experience” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999).

This instrumental view of language is intimately associated with the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis we discussed earlier in Section 2.4. In the relativist framework, speakers of different languages, of diverse structures and systems and grammatical categories, are led by particular linguistic frames of reference to differing conceptualizations of experience of the world. In other words, the differences in expression are indicative of actual differences in conceptualizations of experience. So by looking into the variations as well as universals across languages, CL sees the study of language as a fascinating and challenging field of investigating human cognition and experience.

In the next section, I will focus on the role of grammar in conceptualization. Among other things, special attention will be paid to the cognitive effects of grammatical categorization on event construal.

### **3.1.2 The relation of grammar to cognition**

This section focuses on relating grammar to cognition. It is worth noting from the beginning that “grammar” is a multiply ambiguous term. The use of the term in this section is restricted to its narrow, traditional sense that it refers to a subdiscipline of linguistics alongside phonetics, phonology, semantics and pragmatics. In this narrow sense, grammar consists of syntax (i.e., word order patterns) and (inflectional) morphology (i.e., the word is modified in form to mark its different grammatical categories such as tense, mood and person). The term “grammar” is also often used nowadays in its broad, cognitive sense: either as the mental system in the mind of the speaker representing knowledge of his or her language (i.e., ‘mental grammar’) no matter what form it may take, or as a theory of language as manifested in the names of many major theoretical approaches such as Langacker’s Cognitive Grammar and Chomsky’s Generative Grammar. Cognitive approaches to grammar – one of the two main research areas of the CL enterprise – are

primarily concerned with the entire language system rather than the traditional grammatical elements, structures and categories.

I will strive to link the functions of grammatical categories with the following two central cognitive abilities: categorization and construal. The view of language as an integral part of human cognition has important repercussions for the analysis of traditional grammatical categories. Grammatical markers as conceived in cognitive models do not merely signify grammatical categories with a particular function but, more importantly, denote underlying cognitive concepts. For example, markers of perfectivity encode the conceptual boundedness of the conceived event and markers of past tense encode a conceptualisation of the event as preceding the communicative event. It is hoped that this section will delineate the links between grammatically specified concepts and the cognitive processes of categorization and construal.

### ***3.1.2.1 What grammar reveals about the mind***

As noted in Section 3.1.1, CL studies language in the context of general cognitive abilities in trying to understand its nature and how the linguistic system relates to our conceptual system (and ultimately to embodied experience). It is postulated that language interacts with other more basic cognitive faculties such as perception, attention, categorization and memory.

Grammar proves especially revealing in this regard as compared with lexicon. In contrast to the traditional practice of drawing a clear-cut distinction between lexical and grammatical components, many CL theories entertain the idea of a lexicon-grammar continuum on which lexical (open-class) and grammatical (closed-class) subclasses represent qualitatively distinct endpoints<sup>12</sup>. The two types of subclasses form a gradation consisting in assemblies of symbolic structures which differ solely in terms of the quality of the meaning associated with them. While the meaning associated with the lexical subclass is specific as well as rich in regard to conceptual content, the meaning associated with grammatical subclass is schematic and structural.

Consequently each of the two subclasses has its own special functions. The lexical subsystem serves the function of providing conceptual content whereas the grammatical subsystem serves the structuring function (termed as the “conceptual structuring system” in Talmy, 2000). The latter provides a highly abstract and complex conceptual structure acting as a “scaffold” or a “skeleton” over which elements from the open-class subsystem are laid to provide rich and specific conceptual content. Similarly, Givón (2002) explicates the place of grammar from a functionalist perspective by comparing grammatical and pre-grammatical (lexicon) modes in information processing.

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<sup>12</sup> Talmy (2000) places an emphasis on the distinction between lexical and grammatical elements to represent two distinct conceptual systems.

In the CL paradigm, grammar is conceived of as not only a product but also an important tool of conceptualization. A comprehensive understanding of grammar should incorporate both of them as two sides of the same coin. With regard to the status of grammar as cognitive achievement, many cognitive linguists attempt to map out the cognitive mechanisms and principles which might account for the properties of grammar. Researchers are interested in investigating the conceptual and embodied basis underlying various grammatical structures along with the semantic changes associated with them (including the process of grammaticalization). For example, both Talmy's Conceptual Structuring System model and Langacker's Cognitive Grammar attempt to reveal how grammar encodes perspective, attention, kinesthesia (force-dynamics), etc.

As far as grammaticalization is concerned, MacWhinney (2005)'s Perspective Hypothesis views grammar as arising historically from repeated acts of perspective-taking and perspective-switching. In his proposal, grammatical devices such as pronouns, case, voice, and tense can all be seen as ways of expressing shifts in a basically ego-centred perspective. Bybee (2002) sees grammar as emerging from ongoing responses to cognitive needs. She suggests that grammaticalization and grammatical change are motivated by certain universal cognitive processes (e.g., the ability to categorize recurrent linguistic elements) and the natural outcome is that there are cross-linguistic similarities in the evolution of grammar such as metaphorical extension and the conventionalization of implicature (Bybee & Dahl, 1989; Bybee, Perkins, & Pagliuca, 1994).

With regard to the status of grammar as a cognitive device, it is argued here that grammar performs a structuring role in orienting our conceptualization and framing our experience. CL believes grammatical organization provides us with structural patterns to think with. Talmy (2000) proposes that the total set of conceptual categories that grammatical subsystems can ever refer to constitutes a specific approximately closed inventory which is essential in the conceptualization of states of affairs. The inventory is graduated, progressing from categories and notions that appear universally in all languages, through ones appearing in many but not all languages, down to ones appearing in just a few languages. Individual languages draw in different ways from this inventory for their particular set of grammatically expressed meanings.

Different types of grammatical subsystems hence entail different conceptual structuring systems. They may contribute to the processing of information in an automated, subconscious way. For example, the grammatical categories of a particular language may force the specification of features that have to be actively construed or constructed by its speakers, but appear to be irrelevant or non-significant for speakers of another language. Whorf (1956, p.221) has made the following claim about the significance of grammar (as opposed to lexis):

Users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world.

In other words, the same physical world that we all live in is transformed, as a function of grammatical organization across languages, into different “lived” or “phenomenal” worlds. The reality is therefore experienced differently by speakers of different languages.

More specifically, grammar has a higher potential than lexicon to habitually force speakers into a certain schematization. Schematization is defined by Langacker (2008) as the process of extracting the commonality inherent in multiple experiences to arrive at a conception representing a higher level of abstraction. As grammatical devices are used quite systematically, speakers’ thought are anchored to recurrent notions which in many cases must be expressed in every sentence. The notions encoded by grammar are usually generalized and schematic as opposed to more specific ideas encoded by lexical elements. For example, tense is used to express general notions of time (present, past and future) but not specific notions such as years, hours or days, which are expressed by lexical materials (Radden & Dirven, 2007). Schematic concepts are not specific to any particular domain. The fact that they may easily apply to different conceptual domains gives rise to semantic change of grammatical categories. The meaning of a particular grammatical category such as tense can be extended from its original, basic temporal uses to other related yet atemporal uses, thus manifesting the principle of subjectification (Traugott, 1995).

Next I will look at the specific relevance that grammar bears to two fundamental aspects of psychology: construal (Section 3.1.2.2) and categorization (Section 3.1.2.3). Both these aspects will be discussed with reference to the notion of an event (Section 3.1.2.4.1). The relation of grammar to attention and memory will be explored in Section 3.3.

### ***3.1.2.2 Construal in thought and language***

Construal is an important concept in many CL theories, which is considered central to both language and cognition, esp. to the study of the language-cognition linkage. Going beyond its common sense of “interpreting”, “making sense of” or “assigning a meaning to”, the meaning of “construal” as a technical term refers to “our manifest ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways” (Langacker 2008, p.43). A choice, for example, can be made between *half full* and *half empty* in describing the contents of a glass. Likewise, an event may be described as *I’m going to your graduation* from the speaker’s point of view, or as *I’m coming to your graduation* from that of the hearer. Construal operations cover a wide range of basic cognitive processes such as attention (as manifested in the 1<sup>st</sup> example) and perspectivization (as manifested

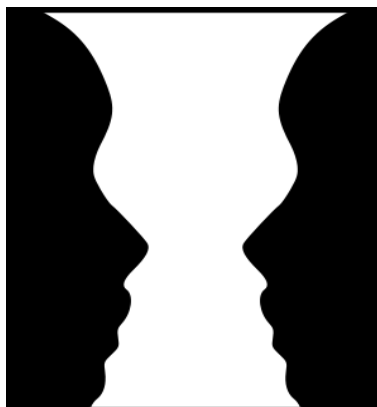
in the 2<sup>nd</sup> example). A survey of the diversity of construal phenomena is not attempted here. Interested readers may see Verhagen (2007) for a detailed and insightful review of the various classifications made by Croft and Cruse (2004), Langacker (1987, 1993) and Talmy (2000).

In the CL paradigm, construal operations are not only pervasive but also immanent in information processing. A characteristic view is that speakers must take a perspective on anything they think of and wish to express linguistically since there is no such thing as a neutral, omniscient observer (Langacker, 1999). Each linguistic expression imposes a particular construal, reflecting just one of the potentially countless ways of conceptualizing and describing the phenomenon in question. The speaker of a particular language can choose among many possible “construals” that differ from one another along various parameters and dimensions (Note that many linguistic expressions may allow for more than one way of characterization). There is not an exhaustive list of all conceivable construal operations. The existing classifications are also open to revision.

While such a definition of construal appears sufficiently clear, it fails to take into account the fact that construal operates on (at least) two theoretically distinct levels: the conceptual level and the linguistic level. One way to examine the relationship between conceptual construal and linguistic construal is to look in some detail at the processes involved in language production, and in particular the role played by “conceptualisation” in those processes. Drawing upon Levelt (1989, 1999)’s model of speech production, Stutterheim & Nüse (2003, p. 854-855) propose that three phrases of the speech production process should be distinguished:

- a. the external world
- b. a partial conceptual representation of the external world
- c. linguistic representations (predicate-argument structures)

Both levels (b) and (c) are results of construal. Construal on level (b) takes place prior to linguistic formulation, potentially producing multiple alternative conceptual representations of the same situation. As a rule, there is more than one way of conceptualizing a scene or an event, either for linguistic or non-linguistic purposes (Radden & Dirven, 2007). Figure 3.1, for example, may be construed as a white vase, two black faces in profile, or anything else, dependent on the observer’s knowledge base. In choosing one particular conceptual alternative rather than another, the observer here attends to different facets of the same scene, resulting in differences in conceptual content. In the context of thinking for speaking (Slobin, 1996), we can see that the speaker may still construe her thoughts in a specific way at the conceptual level that is independent of language influence. Obviously this kind of difference has a direct bearing upon subsequent linguistic description, esp. lexical content.



**Figure 3.1 Ambiguous figure illustrating conceptual of figure-ground reversal (Gregory, 1966)**

Construal on level (c) – linguistic construal – produces alternative linguistic representations of the same scene or event. Take the glass example again for instance, possible descriptions are (1) “*the glass with water in it*”; (2) “*the water in the bottle*”; (3) “*the glass is half-empty*”; (4) “*the glass is half-full*”. The conception of a glass containing water occupying just half of its volume may be evoked on the conceptual level as analogical and directly depictive of the scene being represented, which is fairly neutral compared with each of the expressions above. However, as soon as the image is encoded linguistically by one of the above expressions, a specific construal is necessarily imposed. Crucially, any linguistic construal on the sentence level forces the speaker to select a characteristic linear semantic representation which contains the required marking of theme and rheme as well as various language-specific obligatory categories.

For many purposes, the distinction between levels (b) and (c) is not really necessary. On the one hand, in empirical analysis, ideas at the conceptual level (b) are often not operationalized independently of the units at the semantic level (c). On the other hand, it is believed that linguistic construal operations are essentially based on general cognitive processes. Any semantic distinctions expressed by alternative linguistic construals must be supported by underlying conceptual distinctions and processes (Levinson, 2003). The study of linguistic construal therefore serves as a window on conceptualization – the more or less “*terra incognita*”. One way to investigate properties of a conceived event in our head, for instance, is to analyse the semantic elements in its various descriptions, especially when we take into consideration of the fact that construals can be different not only within languages but also across languages.

Nevertheless the present study requires the separation of the two levels as we address the question of the role of language (esp. grammar) in conceptualization. Current models of language

production, according to Stutterheim & Nüse (2003), are not very explicit about the role of language in conceptualization. Some models (Levelt, 1989; Slobin, 1996) make finer distinctions of level (b), dividing it into macrostructural/global planning and microstructural/local planning. The former involves the WHAT or content of the preverbal message whereas the latter is embedded in and dependent on the former, involving how content is configured for verbalization. Levelt assumes that language specificity does not affect the macro sublevel but the micro sublevel. Slobin holds a slightly different view, suggesting that both sublevels might be affected.

Whether and to what extent conceptualization is language-dependent is of course an open question which requires empirical investigation. We believe that the present study provides a good testing ground from the standpoint of construal for investigating the role of language in conceptualization. Evidence drawn from studying the specific challenges in acquiring typologically different aspects of a second language (here  $\pm$  TENSE) is more revealing than that from crosslinguistic analysis as the recalcitrant learning problem is not only a manifestation of how in very different ways people across languages habitually construe their thoughts and experience, but also a manifestation of how difficult it is for them to reconstrue in a new way. The task of tracking down the underlying causes for different tense uses between Chinese learners and native speakers hence helps to unveil exactly what is distinct in patterns of conceptualization (not just processes of conceptualization in language production) between these language groups.

### ***3.1.2.3 The plasticity of categorization***

#### **3.1.2.3.1 Categorization defined**

Categorization belongs to one of the most basic cognitive activities. We cannot deal with the perceptual complexity of our experiences all at once. Instead, we can only make sense of our experiences by organizing them into categories. The process of categorization thus has a prominent position in human cognition. As Lakoff (1987) put it:

Categorization is not a matter to be taken lightly. There is nothing more basic than categorization to our thought, perception, action and speech ... An understanding of how we categorize is central to any understanding of how we think and how we function, and therefore central to an understanding of what makes us human (p.5-6).

Naturally the countless particular entities or events in our conceptual world have to be necessarily interpreted as instances of categories. Langacker (2008) defines categorization as “the interpretation of experience with respect to previously existing [cognitive] structures”. The antecedently existing structures in categorization, however, do not exist “out there” in the sense of something natural, innate or universal. Categorization, as we see it, involves a dual process



subsuming (1) category construction/formation, i.e., the basic cognitive process of arranging into or establishing classes or categories and (2) classification, i.e., the mental act of distributing things into classes or categories of the same type. Neither of the two processes can be well understood without the other.

How can a person construct a category in the first place? As humans we have the ability to establish commonalities between distinct phenomena and abstract away from differences, and thus to organize concepts into categories (Verhagen, 2007). MacLaury (2000) argues that this ability is inborn, but adaptable. In general, the categories that people use to make meaning through categorisation are those that have developed within a community. They are formed for things that “matter” in those communities, hence are meaningful and relevant to us.

A category is defined here as the unitary conceptualization of a set of similar elements that are judged equivalent for some special purpose (Langacker, 2008). By definition, categories are conceptual units by nature, i.e. mental constructs. Note that categories do not directly describe objective reality. Instead, they are based on our experience and conception, therefore subject to “construal”.

Different models of internal category structure have been proposed, most notably the classical/logical model and the prototype model. The former has a much longer tradition, and is characterized by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions as defining criteria of a particular category. The latter is obviously favoured by the CL camp, which proposes that conceptual categories are characteristically (although not invariably) fluid, that is, not well-delimited in respect to their boundaries. Many studies, particularly those on colour categorization (e.g., Rosch & Lloyd, 1978), have provided empirical evidence that the borderlines of a particular category are often dynamic and flexible. Following Ungerer and Schmid (1996), we are inclined to hold that these two contrasting hypotheses may coexist. The postulated paradigms need not apply indiscriminately to the whole domain of human categorization. Rather they may be restricted to certain areas and perspectives. Also any category is part of an overall system of categories and the introduction of a new category will affect the structure of existing ones.

### **3.1.2.3.2 Linguistic categories**

At least some conceptual categories are crystallised in language as lexical and grammatical categories. Linguistic categories constitute an important source of the pre-existing structures mentioned above, serving as frames of references to apprehend the unstructured world around us. We assume that patterns of experience are linguistically highly relevant, as Whorf put it:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the

contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems of our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language (1956, p. 212)

Whorf claims that language plays an important role in dividing our experience into categories. Languages in the world enforce quite different sets of conceptual distinctions through making obligatory semantic distinctions. Lexical items, i.e., words, are the most commonly found linguistic categories. In many cases, the seemingly equivalent words in different languages, for example *fog* in English vs. *Nebel* in German, are not just linguistic signs of different sounds or forms which symbolize the same referent, but represent culture-specific categorization of our experience (Radden & Dirven, 2007).

Just like lexical categories, grammatical categories index culturally defined meaningful experiences of the world. Languages differ widely as to what is encoded in their grammars. Typological studies do not always take into account these aspects of language that must be expressed. What is obligatory in one language can be entirely absent from another. In the domain of events, for example, some languages always indicate the time of the event relative to the time of speech; other languages must attend to internal properties of the event (e.g., whether it has been completed or is still going on); still others require marking the source of knowledge such as visibility or hearsay. Even for grammatical categories that are common to many languages, it is hard to find any with precisely the same denotation.

Semantic variations encoded by lexicons and grammatical constructions help to evoke corresponding categories in thought (Lucy, 1992). Repetitive use of a predominant linguistic pattern is expected to influence habitual thought. During the process of thinking for speaking, as defined by Slobin (1996), our attention is directed by obligatory grammatical categories to certain perceptual features or to certain ways of construing scenes. Features of a scene that the grammar does not encode through obligatory categories are often left unsaid, and presumably may not be attended (Slobin, 1996).

It is indisputable that the exact relation between linguistic and conceptual categories is far from clear. Sometimes linguistic categories seem to be a direct projection of pre-existing concepts. Sometimes our mental categories are likely to be more specific than linguistic categories. On the one hand, languages have both accidental and systematic semantic gaps. On the other hand, linguistic expressions are typically associated with more than one concept, displaying either polysemy or differences in senses and facets. Sometimes linguistic categories seem to be more specific than our mental categories. We may entertain thoughts that are indeterminate or indifferent to perspectives, but they have to be regimented into a language-specific mode in speaking or

writing. These observations lend support to the argument that linguistic and conceptual categories constitute distinct kinds of representations rather than being understood simply as a part-whole relationship.

#### ***3.1.2.4 Grammatical construal of events: categorization and perspectivization***

So far I have introduced the proposition that in the framework of CL, human experience is inevitably subject to construal operations, which in turn are closely related to the language we use. The categories and distinctions that exist in particular languages intervene in speakers' mental lives very broadly. Grammar in particular offers unconscious and ready-at-hand categories for structuring our experience of the world.

In this study, I selected the domain of events as the locus of investigation which helps to tie together various features of language behaviour. The concept of an event has been studied extensively in philosophy, psychology and linguistics (Stutterheim & Nüse, 2003). This concept will be discussed in more detail below. It forms one of the central categories in different linguistic frameworks, perhaps most notably in formal semantics and cognitive linguistics. In recent decades, cognitive linguists have increasingly invoked event representation as a possible window on the interrelation between perception, cognition and language. Numerous aspects of the structure of human languages, e.g., tense and aspect, are now commonly seen as most immediately relevant to the task of configuring event descriptions (Bach, 2005; Bohnemeyer & Pederson, 2011).

##### **3.1.2.4.1 The definition of an event**

Like many other theoretical terms employed in linguistic analysis and theory, the term “event” has been given various interpretations. To avoid potential confusion, I will clarify the current definition of “event” used in this study. Very generally speaking, the present study takes the term as a shorthand label for conceived events. Three points need to be made about this use of the term.

First of all, what is denoted by the term “event” here is contrasted with real world situations. This distinction is based on the earlier ontological distinction in Stutterheim & Nüse (2003) between two levels of reality: (a) the external world and (b) the partial conceptual representation of the external world in the mind of a language user. Real situations take place in the external world, and are always characterized by DURATION and BOUNDEDNESS (Klein, 1994). Events, however, are taken to be the internal representation of situations in a language user's mind (i.e., psychological entities) rather than any happenings or states of affairs in the external world (i.e., real-world entities). In other words, events (in my present usage) are ideas or conceptual

constructions that exist in the minds of language users. They correspond to phenomena in the limited parts of reality that humans in fact perceive and reason about.

In many studies which do not distinguish between levels (a) and (b), “situation” is used as a cover term for both states and events, the latter having a narrower definition than what we adopt here. That is why, despite the possible risk of confusion, I have used these two terms – “situation” and “event” – loosely in earlier sections. I am also aware that a “situation” defined in such a way might not necessarily represent a natural unity from any strictly objective standpoint. For any happenings to be abstracted out of a possibly very extensive experiential context, they have to be attributed unity of some sort. So what constitutes a situation is dependent on the viewpoint of the beholder – hence also subject to construal. It seems that “situation” is just less subjective a notion than “event”. The distinction between “situation” and “event” is useful for expository purposes.

Secondly, the term “event” as used here is to be distinguished from the concept of a “verbalised event” (see Slobin, 2000), although these concepts are intimately linked in some way. In line with Stutterheim & Nüse’s (2003) distinction, events are conceptual categories which correspond to level (b) whereas verbalized events are linguistic representations which correspond to level (c). The distinction between “event” and “verbalised event” has been often ignored. Fleischman (1990, p.99), for example, offers the following characterization of an event:

The event is but a hermeneutic construct for converting an undifferentiated continuum of the raw data of experience, or of imagination, into the verbal structures we use to talk about experience.

Interpreting experience in terms of ideas or conceptual representations of events (and their participants) may be a universal property of thought (Chafe, 2002). Such ideas are expressed linguistically at the level of the clause by a predicate-argument structure, which typically includes both nominal forms representing entities of some sort (representing various degrees of generality or levels of abstraction) and either verb constellations or an adjective in the predicate phrase. The world does not present “events” to be encoded in language (Smith, 2000). Rather, in the process of speaking or writing, diffuse experiences are filtered through language to become “verbalized events”. Foley (1997), following Grace (1987), advances a very similar notion – the “conceptual event” – or more precisely, the “described event”. A conceptual event is defined as:

[a]n understanding by the speaker that what she is describing is a unitary whole. She represents this understanding by signalling it in a single clause, but the lexemic and grammatical devices the language makes available and the generally accepted conventions for their use determine how this conceptual event is signalled (Grace, 1987, p.37).

Any clause-sized proposition hence is categorized and oriented in space, time and epistemology by a particular language during a particular act of speech.

Any utterance, as realized by a combination of content words and function words or affixes, is always a partial description of the conceived event. There are many options in giving a linguistic description of a particular event. The speakers may or may not choose to take into account some of the entities that are involved. They may focus on (foreground) some features of the event and/or add all sorts of additional more peripheral features. Whether an entity or feature is made explicit or not belongs to the linguistic meaning of the utterance which describes the event being conceived.

The third point to be made is that the term “event” is defined here in a very broad sense inasmuch as it encompasses and ignores all types of internal temporal structure, including those categorized as states, actions, processes, and events in a narrower sense. I note again that “event” is often used in a more narrow sense, and is then characterized by the features DYNAMIC and POTENTIALLY BOUNDED (Vendler, 1967). This narrow interpretation excludes states, actions and processes but subsumes two subcategories: accomplishments and achievements. Incidentally, my current definition of “event” also has a broader coverage than “eventuality”, a term introduced by Bach (1981) as a neutral option with respect to internal temporal contour. “Eventuality”, however, is confined to particular events (in the narrow sense) and states which take place at a given location within a segment of time, thus having a beginning and an end. In contrast, “event” as defined in this study includes generalized types.

#### **3.1.2.4.2 Grammatical categorization and event construal**

In this section, I will introduce and define the pivotal notions of constitutive and perspectival construal. The relation between grammatical categorization and event construal will also be discussed. Emphasis will be placed on the defining features of finiteness and deixis, both reflecting the linguistic expression of subjectivity.

Croft and Cruse (2004) noted that “any sentence involves a myriad of construals of the experience to be communicated” (2004, p. 69). In what follows I will focus on what they call “constitutive construals” – cognitive-conceptual operations which structure our experience of the world. As defined in Croft & Cruse’s (2004) conceptual framework, constitutive construal largely overlaps with the notion of configurational structure as described in Talmy (2000). In this framework, a “scene” describes an organized pattern of thought or behavior (Croft & Cruse, 2004, p. 8). Constitutive construals represent the cognitive conceptualization of the structure of the entities and happenings included in a scene. Constitutive construals are very basic operations as they determine the configurational structure of the conceptual content.

Talmy (2003) lists seven essential qualities which characterize the structure of conceptual content. The property of boundedness is an important one of them, and one that is critically

relevant for present purposes. Talmy points out that boundedness is not simply a spatial or material property. The bounded/unbounded structural schematization not only applies to objects but also to states and processes. If an entity is construed as bounded, it means it is conceived to be demarcated as an individuated unit. If an entity is construed as unbounded, it means it is conceived as continuing on indefinitely with on necessary characteristic finiteness intrinsic to it.

The property of boundedness is manifested in the traditional linguistic distinctions of nouns (count vs. mass) as well as verbs (finite vs. non-finite). Finiteness ordinarily refers to the property of being bounded or limited in magnitude, or spatial/temporal extent. In the linguistic context, the term “finiteness” is conventionally considered as an inflectional category of the verb (Bright, 1992), referring to forms of the verb that are limited in time by a tense and usually show agreement with number and person. Not all languages have finite verbs. Chinese, for instance, is arguably a typical non-finite language (cf., Huang, 1984). Its verbs do not have overt marking in morphology to systematically distinguish finiteness from non-finiteness.

Klein (2009) argues that finiteness is not a mere fact of morphology. In Klein’s proposal, finiteness is a grammatical category in its own right and many syntactic, semantic and pragmatic phenomena are clearly associated with the presence or absence of finiteness. Tense is defined as marking whether the topic time – a temporal span introduced by finiteness – precedes, contains, or follows the time of utterance.

According to Talmy, grammatical elements can shift the basic specification for the property of boundedness to its opposite value, either from unbounded to bounded (i.e., bounding) or from bounded to unbounded (i.e., debounding). Bounding is a cognitive operation by which a portion of the specified unbounded entity is demarcated and placed in the foreground of attention. Conversely, debounding is the cognitive operation whereby the entity formerly within bounds is conceptualized in a form with indefinite extension. Tense and aspect often function as such type shifting operators. Taking tense for example, the use of the non-completive past tense is essentially a bounding operation whereas the use of the habitual present tense is a debounding operation. Some researchers following construction grammars (e.g., de Stewart, 1998, 2000; Michaelis, 2004) interpret these implicit operations as coercion.

Perspectival construals comprise linguistic effects of the spatial or temporal vantage point from which a speaker views an event (or has chosen to represent it) (Croft & Cruse, 2004). Perspective, especially as manifested in deixis, is perhaps the most frequently discussed construal operation. Deixis is a universal phenomenon which stands at the interface of pragmatics and semantics (Lenz, 2003). In a broad sense, a system which relates entities to a reference point is termed a deictic system. In a narrow sense, Lyons (1977, p. 637) defines deixis as “the location and identification of persons, objects, processes, and activities being talked about or referred to, in relation to the spatiotemporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance and the participation in it”. The reference point in relation to language use is confined to the speaker’s

situatedness, or “ground” in cognitive term which includes the speech event, its setting and its participants (Langacker, 1985, p. 113). Langacker (2003) consider English tense and modals as grammaticalized grounding predications. Lyons (1982) also claims that epistemic modality, tense and aspect are among the central means for the expression of he calls subjective deixis.

Cognitive approaches to deixis differ from many traditional treatments in that subjectivity is believed to be deeply involved in the production and comprehension of deictic linguistic expressions. Particular emphasis is thus often placed on the epistemic basis of deixis (Brisard, 2002). Lyons regards subjectivity as expression of ‘the way in which natural languages, in their structure and their normal manner of operation, provide for the locutionary agent’s expression of himself and of his own attitudes and beliefs’ (1982, p. 102). The notion of subjectivity in this study concerns the representation of a speaker’s point of view in the frame of her knowledge system. Speaker-based conception or ego-centric viewing arrangement is thus a crucial construal operation.

### **3.1.3 Tense semantics: Towards a cognitive approach**

In this section, I will look at the semantic nature of tense both from a cognitive and a typological point of view. As a widely-recognized grammatical category, tense still remains a highly contentious area of grammar. The nature of tense is far from being definitively explained in the field of theoretical linguistics. Binnick (1990, p.3) commented that “even after twenty-five hundred years of investigation by students of meaning, grammar, logic, and philosophy, tense is poorly understood.”

This study holds that a complete theory of tense should take into account the fact that tense is a very complex phenomenon with a range of unrelated facets, such as cross-linguistic variation, diachronic development and particularly, idiosyncratic variance. Linguists find that the commonly assumed tripartite distinction of time is not always reflected in tensed languages. Lyons (1968: 134f.) observes that:

It has often been supposed that the three-way opposition of tenses, viz. past tense, present tense and future tense is a universal feature of language. This is not so. Few if any European languages do we find have precisely three tenses. Strictly speaking, English has only two tenses: past tense and non-past tense. Some languages have only future and non-future tense distinction.

The basic past/present tense distinction is also variable across different languages. No two languages are identical in the scope of meanings expressed by the form labeled as the present or past tense even though they are widely accepted categories. The semantic map for the English past/present tense is different from those in French and Dutch. For example, Dutch and French use

the historic present in taking the Minutes of meetings whereas English uses past tense for the same purpose (Burrough-Boenisch, 1998). In fact, the clash between tense forms and tense meanings and the attempts to bring them together has always been the core issue of traditional tense research (Klein, 1994). An adequate theory of tense should accommodate and account for such specific tense distinctions across different languages.

Furthermore, a complete theory of tense should also offer explanations for the more fundamental questions that typological studies present. It is clear from the world atlas of language structures that tense-aspect as a grammatical category is far from universal<sup>13</sup>. There are probably more tenseless languages in the world than some linguists believe. Linguistic investigations (e.g., Smith & Erbaugh, 2005; Smith, 2008) find that speakers of tenseless languages such as Chinese do not have problem with temporal interpretation and representation in their communication. Why does the availability of tense marking vary across human languages? These questions lead one to wonder whether tense is indeed a necessary expression of time. If not, then what is its nature and function in human languages?

In seeking to shed some new light on the last of these questions in particular, this study subscribes to the cognitive paradigm (as detailed in Section 3.1 above). Cognitive approaches to grammar maintain that grammatical categories are conceptual in nature. The categories of tense (and aspect) are a case in point. Although on one level they are grammatically marked categories, they are considered to reflect conceptual apparatus which provide distinctive perspectives upon our temporal experience of events. Radden and Dirven (2007, p.201) state that time as expressed by tense and aspect is “a matter of viewing”. That is, tense relates to the way a situation is located in time, but always from the speaker’s viewpoint. In more technically cognitive terms, situations are *grounded* in time by tense. The moment of speaking serves as the ground (i.e., deictic center) and thus, logically speaking, allows the speaker to refer to three distinct time spheres: past, present and future.

I will use the analogy of visual perception to illustrate the subjectivity of temporal location:

Consider the physical world as independent of the experiences of any living creature. There is scientific evidence that the world seen through a dog’s eyes is different from that seen through a man’s eyes partly due to the anatomical differences in their eyeballs<sup>14</sup>. Metaphorically speaking, tense and aspect systems (and grammatical systems in general) may be likened to the eyeballs

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<sup>13</sup>[http://wals.info/feature/69A?s=20&v1=cd00&v2=c00d&v3=cff0&v4=cccc&v5=cfff&z5=2848&z4=2854&z1=2847&z2=2332&z3=2987&tg\\_format=bigmap&lat=5.5&lng=152.58&z=2&t=\]](http://wals.info/feature/69A?s=20&v1=cd00&v2=c00d&v3=cff0&v4=cccc&v5=cfff&z5=2848&z4=2854&z1=2847&z2=2332&z3=2987&tg_format=bigmap&lat=5.5&lng=152.58&z=2&t=)

<sup>14</sup> Scientists (McGreevy, Grassi, & Harman, 2003) found that even different breeds of dog see the world differently because the eyeballs of different dog breeds have different shapes and retinas. This finding explains why dogs of different breeds have different habits: some chase cars and other just sit in the owner’s lap staring into his/her face. This physical makeup has consequences in animal perception and behaviour.



through which we see the world. The wide diversity of tense and aspect distinctions in human languages resemble the differences in eyeballs among different species. They predispose us to focus on different temporal facets of events. In other words, the temporal world view held by speakers of languages with different tense-and-aspect systems is affected by the lens (or filter)-like function of grammatical tense and aspect.

Furthermore, true vision is more than a mechanical function like an optical lens or “camera” in the eye (Liberman, 1995). Core functions of the mind such as attention and focus play an important role in the process of how we really “see” phenomena in everyday life. These non-physical, psychological aspects of vision are what really make our vision “come to life”. Just as vision is not a purely mechanical process but an integrated system of the mind and body, neither do tense and aspect represent a purely objective observation of the world (it is dubious whether a purely objective observation is possible).

As noted in Section 3.1.1, the school of Cognitive Linguistics advocates a conceptual /experiential view of semantics. Cognitive semantics is embedded in experiential realism as opposed to referential semantics which is embedded in naïve realism (i.e., the way we perceive the world is the way the world actually is). Cognitive semantics emphasizes the role of speakers’ subjective perspective as a crucial intervening link between reality and the language used to grasp and encode it. Cognitive approaches to grammar take issue with a purely objective characterization of tense (and aspect) and accept the premise that the semantics of T/A categories essentially refers to subjective, rather than objective, concerns. With respect to the nature of tense, the cognitive school highlights the relation between ego-centric deixis and speaker subjectivity (Lenz, 2003). Langacker (1987, 1991), for example, criticizes the traditional way of looking at tense held by many theoretical accounts of grammar on the grounds that they have been objective in nature. It is not surprising therefore that traditional grammars fail to provide a unifying explanation for all usage types of tense, temporal and non-temporal.

Essentially, tense is a grammatical category indicating speakers’ subjective construal of the temporal location of a “conceptual” event rather than objective time or circumstances, although they are often compatible. The four types of tense usage under investigation illustrate that, contrary to the commonsensical conception, English tense choice does not simply and naturally reflect objective time frames. The seemingly obvious semantic contrast between the simple past and present tenses is actually just one aspect of a very complex phenomenon that is affected by many variables such as diachronic changes as well as subjective perspectives on temporal reference.

Another typical characteristic of cognitive approaches to tense is the close relationship between temporality and modality (Patard & Brisard, 2011). One of the main interests of these

scholars is the epistemic uses of tense markers, where epistemic modality is understood as indicating “a degree of compatibility between the modal world and the factual world” (Declerck, 2011). Some cognitive linguists analyse tense as based on time (e.g., Cutrer, 1996; Harder, 1996; Taylor, 1999) whereas others consider time as only remotely related to the analysis of tense (e.g., Janssen 1994; Brisard, 2002). The latter claims that modal features are directly relevant to the analysis of the grammar of time (e.g., Jaszczolt, 2009).

### 3.2 Contrastive analyses of English and Chinese temporal systems

In this section I will present a contrastive analysis of the language-specific temporal systems in Chinese and English, which reveals two distinct patterns of temporal experience in relation to event construal for speakers Chinese and English, respectively.

#### 3.2.1 Tense, aspect and “construal”

To begin with, I will outline and define some basic terminology. Tense and aspect are grammatical categories which encode temporal information about events. In the standard account, tense is a deictic category which serves to locate events on a time line, usually with reference to the present moment (e.g., Comrie, 1976; Dahl, 1985). Aspect is not concerned with locating events relative to the deictic centre, but rather with their internal temporal constituency which may be conceived as completed/perfective or ongoing/imperfective<sup>15</sup>. Their difference is stated by Comrie (1976) as one between event-external time (tense) and event-internal time (aspect).

The temporal systems in Chinese and English differ markedly. Chinese is an aspect-prominent language whereas English is a tense-prominent language. Tense in English is obligatory. Every finite verb – and hence every sentence – has to be marked for tense distinction in terms of past, present or future. Unlike English, Chinese is a tenseless language. Chinese has a rich aspectual system with a number of aspect markers like the perfective markers *-le*, *guo* and the imperfective markers *zai*, *zhe*. These markers do not locate events in time; in many linguistic analyses they only serve the function of indicating different ways of viewing events. Both perfective markers provide entirety view (terminative/complete view) of events while the imperfective markers provide partial view of events with *zai* indicating ongoingness of activities and *zhe* describing a continuous activity or state without change (Li & Thompson, 1981). The perfective marker *guo* suggests experience, or something having occurred at least once before. The other perfective marker *-le*, however, is considered controversial. The most commonly found characterization is that *-le* reports an event as

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<sup>15</sup> In modern linguistics, aspect is usually divided into two main categories (Smith, 1997): grammatical aspect and lexical aspect. Grammatical aspect is also known as viewpoint aspect. Lexical aspect is also known as Aktionsarten (i.e., situation types). The literature on lexical aspect is vast, but we will not discuss it here.

a whole or as completed. Zhang (2003) proposes that the perfective marker *-le* in Chinese signals “bounded change”. That is, *-le* denotes changes between different states, indicating various types of transitions, e.g., from one stage to another. Aspect markers in Chinese are not obligatory, however. Some sentences are formally unmarked, and these are considered by Halliday (2009) as carrying neutral aspect.

In the relevant literature, linguistic analyses of tense and aspect vary considerably from author to author (see Section 2.2). For example, Klein’s (1994) analysis differs from traditional accounts in that he defines tense in terms of the relation between topic time and speech time while defining aspect in terms of the relation between topic time and situation time.

Cognitive Linguistics views grammatical tense and aspect not just as merely grammatical categories with a particular function, but as two fundamentally different ways of construing temporal experience (Boogaart & Janssen, 2007; Evans & Green, 2006; Patard & Brisard, 2011; Taylor, 2002). Our temporal experience is potentially composed of many semantic categories, including temporal location (past/present/future), boundedness, etc. Tense and aspect – where these are grammatically marked – reflect underlying cognitive systems that base their representations upon different aspects of temporal experience. Halliday & McDonald (2004) posit that the basic variable in Chinese is not whether the event is construed as past, present or future relative to the time of speaking (or other reference point), but rather whether the event is construed as imperfective or perfective relative to the context. According to Bull (1960), the difference between languages without a past-present distinction such as Mandarin and the standard average European languages such as English is that the former do not indicate axes of orientation but limit themselves to indicating order and simultaneity.

I suggest that the process of tense construal can be subdivided into two steps. The first step pertains to construal of conceptual content or, to be precise, the temporal constitution of the event *per se* irrespective of its location relative to the deictic centre. I call this constitutive construal. This type of construal helps to account for the non-completive past by taking recourse to temporal boundaries. The second step deals with construal of deictic centre – the reference point to which the conceptualised event is being located. I term this perspectival construal. These two concepts can help us explain the historical present tense and dual perspective.

### **3.2.2 Constitutive construal: The parameter of temporal dimension**

The constitutive aspect of event construal has been ignored in existing semantic analyses of tense. Constitutive construal has no direct connection to the deictic centre. Before locating a situation or event on the timeline, speakers of English have to decide first what is being actually located. Events are to time what objects are to space. In particular, two points are of concern here a)

whether the referent event has a temporal dimension and b) if yes, what is the temporal extent of the conceptualised event.

Research on event representation and structure (e.g., Bach, 2005; Bohnemeyer & Pederson, 2011; Croft, 1998; Zacks & Tversky, 2001) has demonstrated that events are hard to handle in terms of categorization and/or cognition. Unlike objects, events do not present themselves as discrete entities with inherent and usually clear-cut boundaries. The temporal dimension of an event is a matter subject to speakers' subjective construal. The cognitive consequences of this fact for speakers of a tenseless language like Chinese are manifested on two levels, corresponding to two distinct clause types. The first level has to do with relational/equative clauses as characterized by two main verb types: *be* and *have*. Some relational propositions are construed by Chinese speakers as time-independent. For example, the proposition of [Columbus *be* the first to discover America] is construed as a statement of mere knowledge which does not have a temporal dimension. In other words, this relational proposition is purely logical and unchangeable.

By contrast, events in English are always time-dependent. English speakers are forced by obligatory tense distinction in their language to locate the fact of Columbus being the first to discover America as a historical event on a timeline. Propositions expressing constant truths such as "*The earth is round*" in English must also reflect the concept of temporal extent, even though its truth value is timeless in this case. The temporal dimension is an intrinsic facet of all event construal for English speakers, no matter whether the event's actual truth value is finite or infinite.

The second level is related to stative states-of-affairs. Chinese predisposes its speakers to privilege the marking of change-of-state over that of a tripartite distinction in time axis. Chinese speakers are prone to perceive an internally undifferentiated, homogeneous state in its entirety whilst English speakers may conceptualize stative state-of-affairs in their entirety or only a subpart of it (Halliday & McDonald, 2004). The former – the time span during which the situation obtains – indicates the situation time (Klein, 1994) or existential status (Johnson, 1981). The latter indicates the topic time, i.e., the time span about which the speaker wants to make an assertion.

Given the same contextual background, what stands out as a conceptual event may vary between speakers of Chinese and English. What appears to be the same conceptual event turns out to disguise underlying differences with respect to temporal construal of experience and event categorization.

### **3.2.3 Perspectival construal: Temporal frames of reference**

Time is a single unbounded dimension. To locate an entity in time we need an orientation point, i.e., an anchor (Smith, 2004). I propose that in making tense choices, different temporal frames of reference are employed by English native speakers and Chinese learners of English. In English there exist two alternate temporal frames of reference, the objective one and the subjective

one. In the objective frame of reference, the anchor point is the objective “now”, i.e., the moment of speech. In the subjective frame of reference, the anchor point is the subjective “now”, which corresponds to speakers’ perception of “my present”. Sometimes the objective now and the subjective now are compatible. Whenever they are distinct, English speakers have a choice between these two different deictic centres, thus rendering different choices.

Based on much analysis of spontaneous native-speaker language use I argue that the implications of a tripartite tense system are vast. One of them is related to pragmatic factors associated with temporal meaning. As emphasized in Section 2.2, tense distinctions in English not only express how events are temporally located but also implicate atemporal concepts. The cognitive motivation for using English tenses to convey such non-temporal experience is argued to rest upon the epistemic status of “presentness” or “pastness” in English speakers (Brisard, 2002). As the default deictic centre or “ground” in cognitive terms, present time is largely equated with “immediate reality”. Past time is largely equated with “non-immediate reality” (Langacker, 1999). At the conceptual level, the present tense is associated with a prototypical cluster of non-temporal yet closely related epistemic properties such as conceptual saliency, actuality and intimacy. Past tense is associated with tentativeness, distance, attenuation, hypothetical supposition, etc. These cultural implicatures of “presentness” and “pastness” are deeply rooted in the mind of native speakers from childhood. Furthermore, the English tenses form a closed system. In a closed system, choice of one form implies contrast with the other possibilities. The element of choice and its contrastive significance allows for more than one level of discourse meaning (Smith, 2003).

By contrast, Chinese learners only use the objective frame of reference. As there are no formal distinctions as to before-now, now, after-now in Chinese, it is natural that the speaker-now is not as salient a notion for Chinese language users as it is for English speakers. Chinese speakers are therefore not predisposed to associate the concepts of present and past with notions of epistemic modality. Unlike English speakers whose mental lexicon of tense forms is most likely to be organized as a network of semantic connections, the conceptual link between temporal and non-temporal domains might be largely unavailable for Chinese learners of English. This missing link may account for their difficulties in learning the extended (metaphorical) tense uses which mediate between time reference and non-temporal concepts.

### **3.3 Getting at the root of the learning problem**

Advanced Chinese EFL learners often complain about experiencing confusion in making tense choices and in interpreting NS tense usage. The root causes of their confusion potentially include the conflicts between a) English language instruction, b) unsystematic exposure to native speaker usage and c) the implicit temporal logic deeply rooted in the L1 of Chinese language speakers. In this section, I will analyse the learning difficulties attested to by Chinese language speakers with

respect to the four problematic aspects of tense usage by turn. However, emphasis will be placed on the role of L1 in processes of conceptualization, which is the subject of the next few paragraphs.

One of the tacit assumptions of Cognitive Linguistics is the principle of Linguistic Relativity<sup>16</sup>. Its core thesis, as described in Section 2.4, is that the grammar of a given language provides a unique frame of reference which may influence the way its native speakers conceptualize and even experience the world. In line with this argument, speakers of tenseless and tensed languages not only describe the world differently but also conceptualize and experience the world differently. As the speaker becomes accustomed to a particular mode of “thinking for speaking” in the course of L1 acquisition, it is very difficult to reset the relevant parameters in the course of L2 acquisition (Slobin, 1996).

I argue that speakers of Chinese and English construe the world in ways that are in accordance with different perspectives induced by their native languages, especially grammatical categories. It is well-known that in the grammar of the Chinese language, the essentially deictic (or “grounded”) category of tense is absent, and aspectual distinctions, detailing the viewpoints from which a speaker can take and express of a situation, are paramount. These language-specific perspectives may lead to different temporal experience grounded in event construal, especially in terms of constitutive construal and perspectival construal.

One possible outcome of this is visible in the interlanguage of English language learners with Chinese as their L1. In spontaneous speech, Chinese learners of English tend to use verb roots, possibly due to time pressure. Verbs in their output thus may resemble the present tense except for the omission of the third person singular *-s*. It is also possible that some learners may overuse past tense due to hypercorrection. In writing or deliberate speech, Chinese learners have time to consciously think over which tense should be used. This psychological process may transform the preverbal message (Levelt, 1989, 1999) into a “tensed” proposition. It seems likely that their output reflects an interaction between a) learners’ consciously learned conception of English tense meanings and uses, b) their exposure to native speaker usage and c) an implicit temporal logic. Factor a) may sometimes be affected by c).

### **3.3.1 Learning difficulties associated with the non-completive past tense**

With respect to the non-completive past tense, two interrelated factors a) and c) may both take effect. Chinese learners often have a misconception, probably due to factors a) and c), that the English past tense carries a “completive” sense. The underlying assumption is that they tend to regard English tense as a grammatical category which functions to indicate the objective existential status of a situation. If a situation was completed or terminated before the speech moment, then the

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<sup>16</sup> Some cognitive linguists (e.g. Langacker) are not committed to the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis. However, on the whole, CL is viewed as a modern approach to linguistic relativity and cognitive relativism (Tai, 2003).

past tense should be used. If a situation persists from past to present, which is the case in non-completive past, then the present tense should be used. As noted in Section 3.2, Chinese learners habitually construe a static situation in its entirety due to their language-specific perspectives. They would not single out any subinterval of it unless they are pragmatically motivated to emphasize a specific subinterval.

Grammarians from different schools (e.g., Coffin, Donohue, & North, 2009; Comrie, 1985; Lock, 1996; Downing & Locke, 2006; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973; Swan, 1995; Young, 1980; Yule, 1998) note that the past tense only locates a situation in the past without saying anything about whether the situation continues into the present or into the future. There is often a conversational implicature, though, that it does not continue to or beyond the present. I identify a hitherto neglected modal use of the English past tense which does not have such a completive implicature. Many apparently illogical uses of the English past emerge from a language- or culture-specific tendency to focus on past events as they were subjectively experienced, whether the events (and states) described continue into the present or not. This can be referred to as an “affective” use of the past tense, as opposed to more familiar “attitudinal” ones as in “*What was your name again?*” that are motivated by a strategic desire to distance oneself epistemically from or to hedge one’s commitment to a proposition or proposal.

Dahl (2011) suggests the possibility of relationships between the structure of human memory and the cluster of grammatical categories usually subsumed under labels such as tense, aspect, mood, and evidentially. It may well be that the distinction of episodic and semantic memory may help explain why English speakers tend to apply a restricted viewing frame (Radden, & Dirven, 2007) which allows them to focus on their subjective experience in the past as opposed to a maximal viewing frame which allows them to see the event in its entirety. Episodic memory is the long term memory of past events that have been personally experienced and is thus based on sensory information. Semantic memory is the long term memory of abstract, general knowledge about the world taken independent of context. Chinese learners and English speakers may differ in terms of which type of memory is activated when they formulate preverbal message. When Chinese learners construe a situation as general knowledge independent of time and place, they take recourse to semantic memory. When English speakers construe the same situation as specific personal events, they take recourse to episodic memory. In this sense, the preverbal message generated by them is different in referential meaning, thus subject to constitutive construal.

### **3.3.2 Learning difficulties associated with tense use in academic citations**

The learning difficulties encountered in the other two types of tense usage under discussion, that is, tense used in academic citations and oral narratives, are further complicated by so-called

discourse conventions. Tense choices for academic citations and oral narratives can be subsumed under the category of alternate perspectives, thus subject to perspectival construal. They are singled out as two separate types because their uses are conventionally associated with specific “rules” which often override objective temporal factors. Chinese EFL learners are instructed to observe these conventions but there are no simple rules to follow.

With respect to tense uses in academic citations, Chinese learners often complain that they cannot obtain native sense either in terms of using tenses or interpreting native uses. The difference between, for example, “Chomsky (1960) *writes* that ...” and “Chomsky (1960) *wrote* that...” seems elusive to most Chinese learners. Such uses may not necessarily make any difference in translation. Many descriptions of the “rules” and conventions related to academic citations are so simplistic that they are often violated in practice by native writers. In fact, the more closely Chinese learners attend to how tense is used by native writers, the more confused they become. Chinese learners report that they cannot access the NS intuition through consciousness raising.

### **3.3.3 Learning difficulties associated with the historical present/past alternation**

With respect to the alternation between the historical present/past tenses in narratives, the rules appear to be less complicated than those in academic citations, yet they seem to be even harder to internalize for Chinese learners. Tense switches do not make any difference either in translation or learners’ psychological reality. They cannot feel the differences as do native speakers even though the differences have been explained explicitly.

### **3.3.4 Learning difficulties associated with situations susceptible to dual perspectives**

As for situations that are susceptible to alternate perspectives, the difficulties seem to be that Chinese learners do not understand the reason or motivation underlying native speakers’ choices. For example, the judges of dancing contests such as “*So you think you can dance*” often use both present tense and past tense in their comments upon the contestants. What, then, is the significance of placing a situation in the present or past time sphere?

A common feature of the above four usage types under discussion pertains to the issue of intertranslatability. The types of sentences in question pose an interesting dilemma when translated into a language like Chinese which lacks the tense distinction. No matter which tense was used in the English original, they are translated into the same Chinese sentence. In translating Chinese to English, Chinese learners have to designate a temporal identity to the conceptual event in mind. Unlike English speakers, temporal location in relation to the time of the speech event is not an intrinsic component of event construal for Chinese learners. A preverbal message or conceptual event (Grace, 1987) as putatively formed in the mind of a Chinese learner does not necessarily



contain any information regarding temporal location in relation to the speech event or to boundaries. Chinese speakers are constrained by their grammar and their “thinking-for-speaking” from designating a temporal identity (past, present or future) to all kinds of preverbal messages. If such a preverbal message entails the property of temporal boundary, be it bounded or unbounded, the mapping onto English tenses is naturally derived from its objective existential status. If the preverbal message does not have the semantic property of temporal boundary at all, for example, in the case of ideational content representing logical and abstract relations, it is re-constructed as a general truth, a timeless relation or a permanent state and naturally best described in the present tense.

To conclude, I point out once again that the types of learning challenges described above are rarely addressed by existing hypotheses in SLA. Moreover, it is not clear whether advanced EFL Chinese learners can overcome the inhibiting influence of their native language. It may well be that there is a “third space” in-between (Cook, 1999, 2003, 2011) The claim is that the thinking of L2 users is distinct from that of monolingual native speakers; their concepts are not precisely the same as those of either language, whether first or second, but are something distinctive of their own.

### **3.4 Methodological framework**

The empirical investigation consisted of two phases. The first phase was informal survey of naturally occurring NS and NNS tense usage. The second phase was systematic survey of judgements and interpretations of tense made by NS and NNS participants. The first phase was in practice extended in parallel with the second phase.

In the first phase, the naturally occurring data was what I managed to collect by being immersed in an English speaking culture and alert to native tense uses as a non-native English teacher, advanced Chinese learner of English and researcher from a L1-tenseless background. This ethnographic approach of participant observation is certainly empirical as it is derived from observation rather than from theory. Naturally occurring native uses were recorded verbatim in the form of field notes. They came in both spoken and written forms. The examples were informally gathered from various sources, ranging from naturally produced conversations, public transcripts from media (e.g., newspaper, films and TV programmes), grammar references books and academic papers. I was thus aware that there would be considerable variation in spontaneity and degree of authenticity. Based on these observations, I held informal focus group discussions with friends of native speakers and advanced Chinese learners of English on a weekly basis. Their contributions helped to reveal why native speakers and Chinese learners made different tense choices. This first phase of informal survey allowed me to formulate the research questions more precisely and design the prompts.

In the second phase of this research, a practical and empirical path was pursued in which I used a survey-based methodology. According to Tummers, Heylen, & Geeraerts (2005), “[a] survey is basically a set of questions submitted to a number of language users... This way of data gathering can be considered a collective way of introspection, where the language intuition of the linguist is extended to a group of native speakers that are [sic] asked to evaluate the grammaticality of an utterance, to specify its meaning, and so on” (p. 229).

The language survey was designed to investigate whether and in what ways advanced Chinese EFL learners and native speakers of English differ a) in their selection of and b) in their interpretive responses to different uses of present and past simple tenses. The prompt materials were devised in view of the four potentially problematic areas of tense usage specified in Section 1.3. The examples used in the survey were either obtained from naturally occurring language use or adaptations based on attested use.

This survey adopted a complementary use of quantitative and qualitative methods. The survey consisted of two stages: the written survey and the follow-up interviews. The first stage of the survey used different elicitation techniques to investigate the tense choices preferred by English native speakers and Chinese learners. The resulting data were further examined in the second stage by structured retrospective interviews. Guided introspection was the main method employed to explore the intuitions of language users, and to elicit the accounts that the participants gave for their choices. Participants were asked to describe what was going on in their minds when they produced and/or interpreted tensed utterances. It was hoped that this method would help to reveal the various factors involved in making a particular choice. Also, comparison can be made as to the kinds of similarities or differences that exist between native informants and L2 learners. The data collected in the second stage were introspective data based on the participants’ (native speaker and non-native speaker) intuitions. Although the responses collected were clearly subjective, they still counted as valuable conscious accounts reflecting the informants’ perceptions and attitudes towards their own tense behaviours. I will spell out the design and implementation of the survey and the follow-up interview in Chapter 4.

Results based on introspection alone are difficult to verify. Interviewees’ statements about language use cannot be taken at face value as what they say and what they practice might be different things. The survey was supplemented by an ethnographic approach of participant-observation (i.e., the first phase of informal survey). The observation of specific features of English tense usage was carried out independently of the survey of introspective data. It was hoped that this ethnographic approach can circumvent certain disadvantages of elicited data. Taken together, these two sources of materials provided empirical evidence – of two different kinds – that can be used to test theoretical hypotheses.

I am aware that an intuition-based approach should be applied with caution. Linguists have many pros and cons as to the use of introspective judgements. Introspection, esp. in the form of acceptability judgements, is a traditional way of collecting linguistic data, often employed by theoretical linguists (notably generative grammarians and cognitive linguists) to study speakers' knowledge (implicit or explicit) about a language item or feature. But the use of introspection has provoked considerable criticism because of its informal manner and subjectivity involved in collecting data<sup>17</sup>. Many (e.g., Labov, 1972) castigate it for not qualifying as valid a scientific method of investigation as rigidly controlled psychological experiments or corpus studies of authentic uses.

The critiques centring about introspection fall into two broad categories: one casts into doubt its validity and the other its reliability. With respect to the issue of validity, Silverstein (1981) calls for special attention to the limits of speakers' language awareness. Silverstein states that few native speakers have clear awareness of their own language habits. Language teachers and linguists are no exceptions even though they can sometimes provide explicit descriptions of language structures and language behaviour (including acquisition). It has been often suggested that linguists should be excluded as informants. For example, Odlin (1994) proposed an introspection hierarchy in the context of language teaching. He pointed out the "limitations on the ability of teachers and linguists to provide reliable judgements." (p. 271). There are reasons to suspect that linguists' judgements often differ from normal native speakers due to theory-motivated bias.

Another point related to validity concerns how one can obtain information about linguistic competence. According to Chomsky (1965, p.10), competence pertains to the unconscious knowledge of language structures that a native speaker has whereas performance pertains to how this knowledge is put to use. This distinction is similar to the classical Saussurean's position on the relationship between knowledge of language and use of language. While some linguists (e.g., Newmeyer, 2003) maintain that grammar is grammar and usage is usage, others (e.g., Langacker, 1987) reject a sharp distinction between these two faculties. The value of introspection is apparently dubious when grammar and usage are considered as distinct. Given that introspection is considered as a way of eliciting "behavioural data in the same way as other measurements of linguistic performance" (Keller, 1999, p. 114), how can one use performance data to investigate linguistic competence? My position is that introspection gives us insights into the competence of the native speaker that other behavioural data (such as corpus studies) cannot. In spite of all the theoretical concerns, it can be taken as a legitimate method.

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<sup>17</sup> Some linguistic schools are criticized for basing their theories on the extensive use of introspective data. Fanego (2004), for example, questioned the empirical base of cognitive linguistics, saying "[a] theory of language that prides itself on its attention to actual linguistic use is expected to rely on facts, rather than on one or two people's intuitions about a few sentences" (p.51).

The problem with the validity of introspective data is further complicated in tasks of grammaticality/acceptability judgements. Schütze (1996) argued that linguistic intuitions elicited through introspective judgements are a result of the interaction of the language faculty with general properties of the mind – “for any effect on a language (judgement) task, there could be an analogous effect on a similar nonlinguistic cognitive (judgement) task” (p.14). According to Schütze, our judgement process is influenced by a considerable number of linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Some of these factors are subject-related and some are task-related. The former is quite obvious. For example, someone’s intuitions (including those of linguists) will be influenced by his or her dialect or socialect. Section 1.4.1 has shown that what appears unacceptable to one native speaker may be perfectly felicitous to another. Task-related factors can be properly controlled for by taking a set of steps used in standard psycholinguistic experiments (e.g., filler sentences and presentation order).

With respect to reliability, introspective judgements can yield more reliable data by adopting certain measures. Although the survey was not an experiment in a strict sense, it utilised a quasi-experimental design and adopted certain experimental-type methods to control potential problems. Statistical tests were performed. A detailed analysis will be provided in Chapter 5. The quantitative results would be more reliable than those commonly based on the introspections of one or two linguists.

From a methodological point of view, this study attempted to link interpretative hypotheses to empirical materials. It is hoped that this preliminary investigation may serve as a step in the right direction. Future research may be conducted employing stricter experimental methods in a process of gradual refinement of hypotheses.

As a side note, I would like to explain why this study did not adopt the method of corpus research. Corpus-based studies have enjoyed growing popularity in modern linguistic investigations, including those carried out within a cognitive linguistic framework (Gonzalez-Marquez, 2007). It is often believed that corpus linguistics is able to yield reliable quantitative data, hence theoretically more respectable than introspection. However, it is questionable as to how reliable corpus data are. To our knowledge, findings derived from corpus studies (Elness, 2009; Hundt & Smith, 2009) sometimes contradict one another due to such technical matters as the design of different corpora and tagging methods. Furthermore, theoretical analyses of the same set of examples often differ quite radically from one theorist to another. Even if corpus data can faithfully reflect the complete picture of objective language uses, the interpretation of the corpus data is still largely intuitive. Corpus investigation was not used in this study for practical reasons. This study was focused on four problematic types of tense uses. Corpus study would not have been useful to this end.

## Chapter 4 Methods

Chapter 4 describes the two-staged survey employed in the present study. Section 4.1 restates research questions and hypotheses. Section 4.2 portrays the characteristics of participants. Section 4.3 presents the design of the first stage, i.e., the written survey. Section 4.4 presents the design of the second stage, i.e., the follow-up interview. Section 4.5 describes the implementation procedures.

### 4.1 Research questions and hypotheses

I will repeat the research questions raised in Section 1.6 in more detail, both for the reader's convenience and because the methods to be described was designed to reflect the nature of the research questions. Specifically, this study addressed the following four research questions:

1. Are there consistent differences in terms of acceptability judgements and interpretations between NNSs and NSs of English with respect to the following four types of English tense usage?

(a) The non-completive past

(b) The historical past (HP) and past tense alternation in oral narratives

(c) Variable tense choice in academic citations in typical EAP/EST written genres

(d) Variable tense choice in conversational descriptions of situations or events that are susceptible to alternative perspectives

2. Are there intra-group differences – i.e. variation – within NNSs and NSs with respect to their acceptability judgements regarding the above four types of tense usage?

3. What are some factors affecting acceptability judgements and interpretations? In particular, is the typological (i.e. tensed or tenseless) nature of their L1 a relevant factor?

4. Are the acceptability judgements and interpretations offered by NNSs and NSs grounded in different conceptualizations of situations between NNSs and NSs, as evidenced by their elicited or spontaneous responses?

This study was in part motivated by the hypothesis that advanced Chinese learners' difficulty in acquiring English tenses may be explained by their distinct language-specific perspectives on event construal, which in turn is a function of the structural differences in their native languages. Accordingly, I have attempted to test the following specific hypotheses against the data:

1. There are consistent differences between NNSs and NSs with respect to the aforementioned four types of tense usage, evident in their acceptability judgements and interpretations.
2. There are consistent intragroup differences within NNSs and NSs with respect to the aforementioned four types of tense usage.
3. There are differences between NNSs and NSs with respect the factors affecting their tense choices and, in particular, the typological character of an informant's specific L1 (especially whether this is tensed or tenseless) will be a significant factor.
4. At least some of the relevant factors are related to different conceptualizations of situations or events held by NSs and different subsets of NNSs (Evidence for this could be interpreted as evidence in support of the claims of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis.)

## 4.2 Participants

There were two main groups of participants in this study: native speakers of English (the NS group) and those who spoke English as a second or additional language (the NNS group). The former was made up of English native speakers while the latter consisted of advanced Chinese learners of English. All participants were adults and each received \$20 for their participation.

For practical reasons, the process of participant recruitment was not a totally random selection. Some of the participants were approached through personal contacts such as the researcher's friends and colleagues. Then more participants were invited to join the research through the initial groups' contacts as a result of snow ball effect. In the following, I will summarize the demographics of these participants.

The NS group consisted of 23 English native speakers, 14 females and nine males. The range of their ages is shown below:

**Table 4.1 Age range of NS participants**

Age	< 25 yrs	25-45 yrs	45-64 yrs	65+ yrs
N (total=23)	1	12	8	2

Thirteen participants in the NS group were born in Australia. The other 10 participants were born in various other countries (China, Falkland Islands, Hungary, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, UK(2), USA). The majority of them had lived in Australia for many years or most of their life time at the time of the investigation. The shortest stay was at least one year.

Australian English, then, was the dominant English variety in this study. Other varieties of English, such as American English, British English, New Zealand English, and South African English, were also involved.

Some of the participants in the NS group can speak a second or third language, for instance, Cantonese, French, German, Haitian Creole, Hebrew, Japanese Mandarin, Portuguese, Spanish, or Tamil. Mandarin/Cantonese was the second language of six participants either because they were language students or because they had Chinese family members. One of the participants with Mandarin as a second language came to Australia from China at the age of five. He was classified into the NS group because his Mandarin was very poor.

All of the participants in the NS group had received or was receiving higher education at the time of investigation. Some were university graduates or students. Some held a Master's or PhD degree. Five were PhD candidates in linguistics at the researcher's university. The professions of these participants varied and included, to name a few, electrical engineer, management consultant, civil servant and high school teacher.

The NNS group had 23 participants, 17 females and six males. Among them, 14 were university English teachers in mainland China. All these teachers held a degree of English major: 11 were PhD candidates or doctorates in linguistics and three had master's degree in linguistics. Also, there were six participants from the researcher's university studying as international HDR (higher degree research) students. Four of them were PhD candidates in linguistics and had worked as university English teachers in mainland China. One of the participants in the NNS group came to Australia from China at the age of 11. She was classified into the NNS group as she was equally fluent in English and Mandarin. Two of the participants were from Hong Kong and were regarded as ESL (English as a second language) learners.

Their age ranges are shown as follows:

**Table 4.2 Age range of NNS participants**

Age	< 25	25-45	45-64	65+
N (total =23)	1	22	0	0

The places where they received English language training/education are shown as follows:

**Table 4.3 Education background for NNS participants**

Areas	Mainland China	Hongkong	Tanwai	Australia
N (total=23)	19	2	1	1

Participants in both groups were a mixture of linguistically naïve informants and informants with linguistic and/or pedagogical background so that the knowledge background could be matched.

### **4.3 Design of the survey**

The empirical investigation consisted of two components: the written survey and the follow-up interview. The survey was mainly designed to collect the acceptability judgements made by NSs and NNSs in response to sample sentences (the “prompts”). Apart from eliciting acceptability judgements and preferred tense choices, the survey also provided a chance for informants to make brief comments on specific tense uses. The follow-up interview was aimed to obtain additional introspective data based on the informants’ responses in the survey (which were now used as prompts). This section will focus on the design of the written survey. The next section (Section 4.4) will explicate the materials and methods employed in the face-to-face interview.

The survey was entitled “English Usage Survey” for the benefit of respondents. This phrasing was intended to assume a general and neutral tone. It was hoped that the possible impression that it was a kind of grammar test might thus be reduced. The survey itself was divided into four parts (See Appendix). The first three parts contained examples of potentially problematic tense usage for Chinese learners, and different tasks were used to elicit participant’s reactions and judgements: Part I took the form of multiple choices; Parts II and III used acceptability judgement tasks. Part IV dealt with different aspects related to tense usage, including metalinguistic knowledge and tense repairs.

This section will begin with a description of the prompts (sample utterances/sentences) in terms of the four underlying categories (Section 4.3.1). This is followed by explanations of the criteria considered during the developing process and specification of their sources (Section 4.3.2). I will then outline different types of tasks used in the survey as well as their instructions and formats (Section 4.3.3). Finally, I will introduce the organization of the survey (Section 4.3.4).



### 4.3.1 Prompt samples

The core purpose of the survey was to provide a co-text – a textually represented context-of-situation – in which judgements and comments related to problematic uses of the simple past and present tenses listed above could be elicited. The majority of the content reflected the four types of problematic tense usage described above. In addition, there were some prompts which functioned as contrasting samples for target prompts. I will describe these target prompts in accordance with their inherent characteristics. I will also analyse the linguistic contexts wherein these tense usage occur.

#### 4.3.1.1 Samples containing non-completive use of the past tense

The use of non-completive past tense is frequently characterized in terms of “past time association” (Riddle, 1986). The survey considered two subtypes of past time association: the first one was associated with speakers’ own past memory (Riddle, 1986) and the second with a past contextual frame (Hinkel, 1997). Examples (4.1) and (4.2) below illustrate the first subtype.

(4.1) “***When I was with you at the shop today, I spoke to that really cute assistant. But I don’t remember what colour eyes he had.***”

(4.2) Ann: ***Do you remember that Danish family we met in Majorca last summer?***  
Bob: You mean Kirsten and Ole? They weren’t Danish --- they were Norwegian.

The underlined past tenses above can be considered to be linked with a specific past memory, indicated in each case by the use of “remember” in the preceding clause. Alternatively, explicit past time references were often present in embedded structures, such as “when I was with you at the shop today” in (4.1) and “that Danish family we met in Majorca last summer” in (4.2).

Some prompt sentences of this subtype did not necessarily contain explicit reference to the past. Nevertheless that the speaker had a definite past time in mind when she made the utterance can be inferred from (a) a past-time adverbial in the same sentence, (b) the preceding language context, or (c) the extra-linguistic context (Leech & Svartvik, 1994, p. 68). The underlined past tense in (4.3) is an illustration of (b): the speaker is thinking about the moment when she saw the house that they just passed.

(4.3) A: ***Did you see the house we just passed?***  
B: No. What about it?  
A: It had a green and orange roof.

The second subtype of non-completive past tense was typically marked by a past contextual frame, which was linguistically represented by means of maintaining tense consistency throughout the complex clause. This subtype is different from that of past memory in that the latter needs to be directly grounded in personal experience of the events being talked about whereas the former does not necessarily involve personal experience. The underlined predicative in (4.4) and (4.5) below are expressed in the past tense to remain consistent with the past tenses used in preceding subordinate clauses.

(4.4) *The animal you saw was a possum; see, there he is running up a tree.*

(4.5) *They were very tired, because **the slope they were climbing** was steep.*

In (4.4), the speaker may or may not be able to see the possum. Similarly in (4.5) the speaker may or may not be able to see the slope herself.

#### **4.3.1.2 Samples with content susceptible to alternative interpretations/perspectives**

In contrast to the non-completive use of past tense, sometimes it is possible for speakers to entertain alternative perspectives with regard to certain states of affairs, consequently either the present or past tense is a cognitively plausible option. This may apply to either different speakers or the same speaker, be it on the same occasion or at different times. In the following examples, the possible conceptualizations of the given events are not confined to a particular perspective.

(4.6) *Shakespeare was/is a renowned playwright.*

(4.7) *[The speaker, who is at a flea market, is trying to explain why she bought the second-hand item she is holding.] It didn't/doesn't have any stains on it.*

(4.8) *I'm sorry we left Chester. It was/is such a nice place.*

The choice of tense may depend on what type of information the speaker wants to express: the present tense stresses factual accuracy whereas the past tense points to temporal connection, as those described in the non-completive past tense. The speaker may have access to both present and past perspectives when she is formulating her thoughts. Even for prompts classified as Type 1, the choice of the past tense is perhaps more often a question of a predominant choice rather than absolute one.

Note that the above prompt examples vary from one another where the tense usage under investigation occurs. (4.6) is a simple sentence without any additional information. (4.7) is also a

simple sentence, but relevant contextual scenario is provided in the bracket. (4.8) contains two simple sentences, with the first one providing necessary context for the second.

#### **4.3.1.3 Samples of tense usage in academic citations**

This type of tense usage centred round reporting past statements or findings in scientific, technical and academic discourse. It may as well be subsumed under Type 2, representing a special type of dual perspective. Example (4.9) below may be used in either the present or past tense depending on varied factors.

(4.9) *Smith (1980) argued/argues that Britain is no longer a country in which freedom of speech is seriously maintained.*

Example (4.10) was aimed to elicit informants' metalinguistic knowledge regarding tense usage for academic attribution in EST and EAP discourse. Meta-linguistic awareness is defined as the ability to reflect on the use of language.

(4.10) What are the main factors in selecting tenses in academic citations? E.g. *Chomsky (1957) claims/claimed that...*

#### **4.3.1.4 Samples of the historical present and present/past alternation in narratives**

The occurrence of tense alternation between the past and historical present tense was represented in a joke. The same joke was told in four different versions, the only difference among them lying in the tense uses, including shift from present to past (See 4.11) and vice versa (See 4.12).

(4.11) *A policeman stops a woman and asks for her license.  
He says "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."  
The woman answered "Well, I have contacts."  
The policeman replied "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!"*

(4.12) *A policeman stopped a woman and asked for her license.  
He said "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."  
The woman answers "Well, I have contacts."  
The policeman replies "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!"*

### 4.3.2 Development of materials

The samples used in the survey focused on the four aforementioned types of tense usage which are problematic for advanced Chinese learners of English. Another practical consideration was that the samples developed or selected needed to be concise, to suit the length of the survey.

The majority of prompts were simple sentences. Complex sentences were also incorporated in order to investigate the possible effects of different syntactic structures on verb choice. For example, example (4.13) represents tense used in object clause as indirect speech.

(4.13) *"I'm sorry," she said, "but I told Mr. Martin yesterday that we are/were not thinking of selling."*

In (4.14) below, the underlined segments of the answers can take two different forms: in the first case, an embedded noun clause (i.e. a relative clause) containing a verb in the past tense functions as the subject of the verb (*have*) while the second case is a simple sentence with no embedded or subordinate verbs. This distinction is meant to investigate whether the tense choice under investigation would be influenced by its preceding noun clause:

(4.14) *Beth might answer Anna in two ways:*

*Beth: Oh, Harry Smith! The boy you spoke to has/had blue eyes.*

*Beth: Oh, Harry Smith! He has/had blue eyes.*

The prompt samples used in the survey mainly came from three sources. Some were taken or adapted from related academic research. The following examples were taken from Tyler & Evans (2001).

(4.15) *My daughter's father was Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years.*

Some examples were taken or adapted from public transcripts. The following dialogue was an excerpt from the movie *"So I married an axe murderer"*<sup>18</sup>.

(4.16) *Mother: Your Sherri's late.*

*Son: Mum...Sherri and I broke up.*

*Mother: Not Sherri? I liked Sherri. I didn't like the other girls you brought home.*

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<sup>18</sup> Script can be found at [http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie\\_scripts/s/so-i-married-an-axe-murderer-script.html](http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/s/so-i-married-an-axe-murderer-script.html)

Some examples were based on attested use by native English speakers, see (4.15),

(4.17) *Native speakers of English sometimes say: “**I have this friend**, ...”, and sometimes they say: “**I had this friend**, ...” regardless of whether this friend is still around or not.*

The samples were either directly borrowed or slightly modified to suit the layout of the survey. The appropriateness of sample sentences had been tested in the pilot study by two native speakers of English and two Chinese EFL learners.

### 4.3.3 Methods

This section describes the tasks used in the survey, based on the prompts described above, which were (a) multiple choice tasks (Part I), (b) acceptability judgement tasks (Parts II and III), and (c) open questions (Part IV). I will introduce each of these tasks by turn and provide information regarding the respective instructions as well as formats that were made available to participants.

#### 4.3.3.1 Part I

Part I included a total of ten separate items, consisting of eighteen prompt samples. Eight out of the eighteen prompt samples formed four pairs in which a contrast was contrived within each pair in terms of the context in which the tense choice under investigation became relevant. This context could be specified co-textually, in a juxtaposed clause. For example:

- (4.18) (a) ***The animal you saw** \_\_\_\_\_ **a possum**; see, there he is running up a tree.*  
(b) ***The animal you saw** \_\_\_\_\_ **a possum**; this picture in the guidebook proves it.*

The first clause in (4.18a), “*The animal you saw \_\_\_\_\_ a possum*”, is exactly the same as that of (4.18b), but the second clause differs. Similarly, the other three pairs were designed with the same intent though with different contextualisation strategies. For instance, the familiar real-world referent in (4.19) remains the same although the predicates are different:

- (4.19) (a) ***Shakespeare** \_\_\_\_\_ **a renowned playwright**.*  
(b) ***Shakespeare** \_\_\_\_\_ **a notorious drunkard**.*

The response options for each prompt included four alternatives: “present tense”, “past tense”, “both acceptable” and “not sure”. Furthermore, with regard to each prompt sample, participants were invited to add their comments in as few or as many words as they liked.

The instructions for Part I are shown below:

- For the following sentences, please choose the item that contains the appropriate tense choice OR indicate that both are acceptable OR that you are not sure. Please consider the whole situation when making your choice.
- Just trust your instinct. However, you will have an opportunity to reflect on your choice.
- If your answer is C (both acceptable), try to indicate any difference that you may FEEL in meaning (direct or implied) or in use (e.g. used in different contexts/situations) between the two choices. An asterisk (\*) signals that you need to write your comments in the space where it says “Your comments”.

The main presentation mode of the survey was electronic. I chose a Powerpoint file (PPT) as the main user interface since this format could help informants focus their attention on each individual slide. As only one sample was placed on the screen for each slide, the potential influence from the tense choices in neighbouring prompts could hopefully be minimized. Participants were advised that they could add their comments in the space below each slide. The PPT format is shown below:

1a) The animal you saw \_\_\_\_\_ a possum; see, there he is running up a tree.

A) is  
 B) was  
 C) both acceptable \*  
 D) not sure \*

Word files were also used as an alternative as I anticipated that some informants might not be familiar with Powerpoint. Prompts were presented in the form of a table: the sample sentences were in the left-hand column and the answering space in the right-hand column, where sufficient space was left to avoid cramming in responses. The Word file format is shown below:

a) The animal you saw _____ a possum; see, there he is running up a tree. A) is                      B) was C) both acceptable*    D) not sure*	(   )  <b>Your comments:</b>
b) The animal you saw _____ a possum; this picture in the guidebook proves it. A) is                      B) was C) both acceptable*    D) not sure*	(   )  <b>Your comments:</b>

#### 4.3.3.2 Part II

Part II contained twelve sample sentences, forming a total of six minimal pairs. Minimal pairs refer to pairs of prompt samples which are only contrasted in terms of tense usage, while all other things remain equal.

Part II consisted of acceptability judgements tasks. Informants were asked to make global judgements on the degree of “acceptability” of tense uses. A seven point measurement scale (i.e., a Likert scale) was adopted, ranging from (-1) “completely unacceptable” to (5) “very natural”. Informants were also invited to give their comments, as in Part I.

The instructions for Part II are shown below:

- The following pairs of sentences are identical except for their tense uses.
- Please indicate how acceptable/unacceptable you think each example of the underlined tense use is by using the following scale.

Completely unacceptable	Can't decide	Barely acceptable		Fairly acceptable		Very natural
-1	0	1	2	3	4	5

- Please feel free to add your comments. If you think both tenses are acceptable, is there any difference in meaning (direct or implied) that you may feel between the two sentences? (Tip: Try imaging a situation where one choice is preferred over the other.)

The PPT format is shown as below:

la) My daughter's father was Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years.

lb) My daughter's father is Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years.

Completely unacceptable	Can't decide	Barely acceptable		Fairly acceptable		Very natural
-1	0	1	2	3	4	5

The Word format is shown as follows:

1a) My daughter's father <u>was</u> Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years.	( )  <b>Your comments:</b>
1b) My daughter's father <u>is</u> Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years.	( )  <b>Your comments:</b>

#### 4.3.3.3 Part III

Part III was also based on an acceptability judgements task, consisting of four different versions of the same joke. Informants were asked to order these versions in terms of naturalness and add their comments.

<b>#3.1</b>  <b>Past tense</b>	A policeman <u>stopped</u> a woman and asked for her license.  He <u>said</u> "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."  The woman <u>answered</u> "Well, I have contacts."  The policeman <u>replied</u> "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!"
<b>#3.2</b>  <b>Present tense</b>	A policeman <u>stops</u> a woman and asks for her license.  He <u>says</u> "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."  The woman <u>answers</u> "Well, I have contacts."  The policeman <u>replies</u> "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!"
<b>#3.3</b>  <b>Switch from present to past tense</b>	A policeman <u>stops</u> a woman and asks for her license.  He <u>says</u> "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."  The woman <u>answered</u> "Well, I have contacts."  The policeman <u>replied</u> "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!"
<b>#3.4</b>  <b>Switch from past to present tense</b>	A policeman <u>stopped</u> a woman and asked for her license.  He <u>said</u> "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."  The woman <u>answers</u> "Well, I have contacts."  The policeman <u>replies</u> "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!"



The instructions of Part III are shown as follows:

- The following passages are all identical except for their use of tense. After you have viewed all the four versions, please indicate if any of them is unacceptable or unnatural and try to order the others in terms of naturalness, with the most natural first.
- Compare the versions that are acceptable and describe any difference in meaning (direct or implied) that you may feel.

#### 4.3.3.4 Part IV

Part IV contained four topics, each relating to different aspects of tense usage. They all required informants to answer questions that entailed conscious introspection. The first two questions took the form of multiple choice. They focused on eliciting the type of metalinguistic knowledge that informants used in their decision making processes. Q1 looked at factors purported to influence their overall performance while Q2 focused on tense usage in academic citations only. The tasks are given below.

<p>Q1. What was it that enabled you to decide on tense uses in this survey? Choose from the list below. You may choose more than one thing.</p> <p>(A) Intuition (B) Education (teachers, grammar books, etc.) (C) Native speakers' usage (D) Other sources (please specify)*</p>	<p>( )</p> <p><b>* Your comments:</b></p>
<p>Q2. What are the main factors in selecting tenses in academic citations? E.g. <i>Chomsky (1957) <u>claims/claimed</u> that...</i></p> <p>(A) Time of publication (B) Relevance (C) Agreement with the author's view (D) Other factors (please specify)*</p>	<p>( )</p> <p><b>* Your comments:</b></p>

Q3 addressed the issue of tense repairs. In both examples, native speakers were talking about the ownership of cars. Q 3.1 contained an instance of self-repair from the past tense to the present; Q 3.2 contained an instance of other-repair but in the opposite direction (i.e. present to past) (see

Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). Informants were asked to explain the reasons – as they understood them – for such repairs, and to provide any similar examples they could think of.

(Q 3.1) *When spotting a nice car on the street, Adele thought of her cousin living in America, and said, “Emily had the same car... I mean, Emily has the same car.”*

(Q 3.2) *Anne: Jane just bought a Volvo.*

*John: Maureen has one.*

*Anne: John, Maureen had one. You've got to quit talking about Maureen as if you were still going together. You broke up three months ago.*

The instructions for Q3 are shown as follows:

- The following two examples contain tense “repairs”. Please explain the reason for repairs.
- Are these corrections acceptable to you? If yes, please explain the reason for corrections. If no, why not?
- Try to recall similar situations where tense repairs were made if you can, and explain the reason for repair.

In the last question (Q4), informants were asked to state possible reasons why sometimes native English speakers choose to say “*I **have** this friend*” and sometimes “*I **had** this friend*”, respectively. In contrast to the tasks used in the first three parts, whose goal was to investigate the “appropriateness” of particular tense usage in given contexts, the objective of Q4 was to explore the various situations in which the two choices might be available.

#### **4.3.4 Organization of the survey**

This section describes the sequencing of prompt materials in the survey. The items within each part were randomly sequenced. In Parts I and II, the constituent samples of each contrasting pair were put next to each other under the same item as (a) and (b), respectively. The order of response choices in Part I remained consistent: (A) for “present tense”; (B) for “past tense”; (C) for “both acceptable”; (D) for “not sure”. No other distracters were used in the survey.

Informants in each group were evenly assigned to two different versions of the survey in which prompts were presented in reverse orders. Presenting prompt materials in reverse orders is a strategy that is widely used in linguistic experiments. We conformed to this practice in the hope of avoiding potential unwanted effects from fatigue, boredom, or habituated response strategies informants may have developed over the course of the experiment (Cowart, 1997).

The ordering of the four parts was based on a consideration of the difficulty level. The survey started with the multiple choice tasks, followed by acceptability judgements as the former were more familiar than the latter to most informants. The questions in Part IV were designed to follow on as logically as possible from the issues raised in previous parts of the survey.

#### 4.4 Design of the interview

The follow-up interview was designed to build upon the results of the survey. The purpose was to further explore the similarities and differences that might emerge between the two groups in their understandings of the meanings and uses of English tenses.

As the first step of our investigation, the survey was mainly concerned with the perception of tense usage in a sentence as a whole (a holistic perception). As the second step, the informants' choices together with their comments were further examined through retrospective interviews. Questions in the interview were designed to investigate reasons for the choices or decisions made with a focus on specific features or aspects of the prompts in question. Specifically, the interview directly addressed the following issues:

- 1) To clarify and seek elaborate accounts of earlier comments provided in the survey;
- 2) To investigate the factors determining the selection of one tense over the other;
- 3) To explore the possibility of making alternative tense choice by the same respondent;
- 4) To distinguish different meanings conveyed by different tenses in case of two possible readings;
- 5) To provide opportunities in which spontaneous tense uses, esp. those relevant to the interest of the study, could be elicited.

The investigation in the follow-up interview was conducted in a controlled manner. Semi-structured prompts were developed in advance for each interviewee based on their individual responses in the first stage. These prompts in general included a set of questions as well as additional examples for discussion. Investigation of tense usage with regard to the above disparate aspects was initiated by the following prompt questions:

- 1) Prompt questions designed to clarify earlier comments provided in the survey:
  - *Can you explain how you picture the situation?*
  - *Can you describe the situation as you imagine it?*
- 2) Prompt questions designed to explore the possibility of choosing alternative tense choices by the same respondent:

- *Is there any possibility to use past/present tense here?*
  - *Can you imagine someone using past/present tense here?*
  - *Do you see any reason to use past/present tense here?*
- 3) Prompt questions designed to investigate the factors determining the selection of one tense over the other:
- *Is there anything in the sentence itself that influences your choice?*
  - *Where/ in what contexts would you use past/present tense?*
- 4) Prompt questions designed to distinguish different meanings conveyed by past and present tense in case of two possible readings:
- *What kind of difference can you feel between past and present tense?*
  - *How do you feel about the use of past/present tense?*
- 5) Prompt questions designed to provide opportunities in which spontaneous tense uses could be elicited:
- *Can you tell me something about your hometown?*
  - *Can you tell me something about your recent trip?*

During the course of the interview stage, newly obtained data were reviewed regularly. This approach allowed prompt questions to be formed progressively so they remained open to new insights as the data collection continued. For example, prompt questions targeting participants' feeling towards unacceptable tense uses were formed after some informants had issued such comments. It was believed that probing new information would help further clarify the differences between NSs' and NNSs' perceptions and judgements. The reviewing process also provided an opportunity for ongoing reflection by the researcher to promote building the conceptual links between the collected data and the developing analysis (Richards, 2003).

Prompt questions were usually supplemented with additional prompt examples similar or related to the ones used in the survey. These additional examples were not only helpful in studying whether individual informants were consistent in their tense choices, but also in refining the examination of potential factors which might be affecting or determining these choices. The following are some of the additional examples accompanying prompt samples used in the survey:

Prompt samples in the survey	Supplementary examples in the interview
<i>Shakespeare <u>was/is</u> a renowned playwright.</i>	(4.20) <i>Leonardo <u>was/is</u> the greatest genius of Italy.</i>
(a) <i>The animal you saw <u>was/is</u> a possum; see, there he is running up a tree.</i> (b) <i>The animal you saw <u>was/is</u> a possum; this picture in the guidebook proves it.</i>	(4.21) <i>The animal you saw <u>was/is</u> my dog.</i>
<i>Mother: Your Sherri's late.</i> <i>Son: Mum...Sherri and I broke up.</i> <i>Mother: Not Sherri? I <u>liked</u> Sherri. I <u>didn't</u> like the other girls you brought home.</i>	(4.22) <i>"It's my daughter. My daughter <u>liked</u> you. She's worried about you."</i> (4.23) <i>(After a new haircut) I <u>liked</u> her the way she was.</i>
(a) <i>My daughter's father <u>was</u> Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years.</i> (b) <i>My daughter's father <u>is</u> Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years</i>	(4.24) <i>He <u>was</u> my ex-wife's dog.</i> (4.25) <i>The philosopher, social scientist, historian and revolutionary, Karl Marx, <u>is</u> without a doubt the most influential socialist thinker <u>to emerge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.</u></i>

The interview was conducted within a short period of time after the survey. Introductory remarks in each interview began with the stated purpose of the survey. It was explained to NS participants that Chinese is a tenseless language and that Chinese speakers have considerable difficulty in acquiring a native-like mastery of English tenses. The interviewer hoped by means of this research to obtain native speaker insights to help language teachers allay the typical confusion among Chinese learners over English past/present tense usage.

While the prompt questions and supplementary examples used in all interviews were basically the same, each interview was individually customized so that it commenced with questions that respondents would enjoy answering based on their earlier responses in the survey (De Vaus, 2002). When referring back to earlier responses in the survey, informants were given a chance to change their minds, and such changes were of course recorded. In such cases informants were encouraged to give the reasons for their change of mind by pinpointing certain individual factors that might have led them to make the change they did.

## 4.5 Implementation procedures

The study was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, the participants were asked to respond electronically to survey questions. In the second stage, the participants were invited to participate in a face-to-face interview wherein the researcher would ask further questions based on their responses given earlier. Participation in each stage of the study normally took less than an hour.

The general purpose of the study was made clear to the participants from the very beginning. Before they started to complete the survey, they were informed of the relevant information from the consent form. The project was entitled as “*Exploring uses of English tenses*”. The purpose of the project was stated as “*to discover the causes for differences in English tense uses between native speakers of English and advanced Chinese learners. It is hoped that the results of this study will contribute to more effective teaching approaches for English tenses.*”

In order to maximize the possibility of eliciting natural responses, the participants were given general instructions as below:

- This survey is NOT a test. It is interested in your personal opinions and thus there are no ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ answers.
- Say the sentences out loud, choose the way that you would NORMALLY practice.
- It’s perfectly OK if you wish to change your mind about any answers during or since doing the survey.

In the first stage of written data collection, surveys were distributed to the participants via email in the form of PPT attachments. In rare cases where the participants were either uncomfortable with the use of PPT software or computers, surveys were presented to them in WORD format or printouts as an alternative. Participants using the PPT-interfaced surveys were asked to type their answers and comments into the space below each side (Instructions on how to add comments in PPT files were given in the covering email). Participants using the WORD-interfaced surveys or printouts could fill in their answers and comments in the designated space on the survey form.

Instructions in the first stage are shown as follows:

- This survey aims to clarify different understandings of the English tenses that may be held by native speakers and advanced Chinese learners.
- English has two basic tenses: present and past. Example: She goes versus She went.

- This survey has four sections. In it you are invited to reflect on your own understandings and uses of the two key tenses mentioned above. Crucially, you are also asked to distinguish between different possible meanings expressed by sentences where the verb is in the simple present or past tense. Please feel free to add your comments in as few or as many words.

In the second stage, participants were interviewed individually by the researcher, which usually took place on the following week after the written data were collected. The settings of the interviews varied mainly depending on the individual preference of the participants. Some were conducted indoors, e.g., in a quiet lab room or at participants' home; some were conducted outdoors, e.g., on the campus lawn or in a coffee shop. All interviews were audio recorded by a digital recorder. The length of each interview averaged around one hour. Before the actual interview started, the interviewer would state the instructions given below:

- Don't worry about "grammatical correctness" prescribed by textbooks or even grammar books. Modern linguists do not believe that there is any correct grammar beyond what people NORMALLY say. Just reflect on your OWN understanding and uses. YOUR OWN FEELING for the situation in which different tenses might be used is really what counts here.
- Don't look really hard for reasons to justify your choice. The researcher will be interested in any POTENTIAL or POSSIBLE difference expressed by statements using different tenses, i.e., how you FEEL about them or whether one suggests something different from another. Consider the following suggestions:

<i>Both acceptable, but with different emphases</i>	<i>Both acceptable, equally good</i>
<i>Both acceptable, but used in different contexts/situations</i>	<i>Both acceptable, A is better/preferred</i>
<i>Both acceptable, but used to express different things</i>	<i>Both acceptable, B is preferable</i>
<i>Both acceptable, with little or no difference (interchangeable)</i>	<i>A in general, sometimes B</i>

Instructions were given in English. In the interview, NNSs were asked mainly in Chinese. The participants from the NNS group were allowed to respond in either English or Chinese as their choice.

## Chapter 5 Results and Discussions

Chapter 5 aims to present the results of my investigation in as much detail as possible. Section 5.1 describes data coding. Section 5.2 reports quantitative results of the first three parts of the survey. Section 5.3 reports qualitative results of the retrospective interview as well as the comments of the survey (including Part IV). Section 5.4 analyses both quantitative and qualitative results in terms of the four types of tense usage at issue. Section 5.5 summarizes and discusses the results in response to the research questions delineated in Section 1.6 of the introductory chapter and in Section 4.1.

### 5.1 Data coding

Twenty-two NSs and twenty-two NNSs completed the two-staged survey. The coding was conducted by the researcher in the process of quantitative analysis. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher in the process of qualitative analysis. Some of the responses given by NNS informants were expressed in Chinese, which were translated by the researcher into English (The researcher is a NATTI<sup>19</sup> accredited translator).

### 5.2 Quantitative results (Parts I, II, III)

This section reports the quantitative results from the first three parts of the survey in turn. Part I consisted of multiple choice tasks (see Section 5.2.1) while Parts II and III consisted of acceptability judgement tasks (see Sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.3). Part IV as well as the comments collected in administering the first three parts produced qualitative results, which will be reported in Section 5.3.

#### 5.2.1 Quantitative results for Part I: Multiple choice tasks

In Part I, informants from both the NS (N=22) and NNS (N=22) groups were asked to choose the appropriate tense for each of the 18 prompts in the form of multiple choice tasks. The four options for each particular prompt remained the same: the past tense, the present tense, BOTH and NOT SURE. The number of total responses given by each group was both 396. Table 5.1 summarizes the overall distribution of tense choices for each group in terms of both frequency and percentage. The results for each particular prompt will be reported later in Section 5.2.1.4.

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<sup>19</sup> NATTI: National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters Ltd. NAATI is the national standards and accreditation body for translators and interpreters in Australia.



**Table 5.1 Summary of tense choices in Part I: Multiple choice tasks**

Tense choice	NS (N=22) Frequency (%)	NNS (N=22) Frequency (%)
Past tense	177 (44.70%)	96 (24.24%)
Present tense	112 (28.28%)	241 (60.86%)
Both	107 (27.02%)	54 (13.64%)
Not sure	0 (0%)	5 (1.26%)
Total	396 (100%)	396 (100%)

Table 5.1 shows that the most frequent choice for the NS group was the past tense, making up 44.70% of the total 396 responses; followed by present tense (28.28 %) and BOTH (27.02%). None of the NS respondents chose the option of NOT SURE. In contrast, the dominant tense for the NNS group was the present tense, making up 60.86% of the total 396 responses, followed by past tense (24.24%) and BOTH (13.64%), the least being NOT SURE (1.26%). NNS informants chose NOT SURE on five occasions as opposed to none in the NS group.

T-tests were conducted to compare the responses between NS and NNS groups in terms of the percentage of past tense, present tense and BOTH, respectively. NOT SURE was excluded due to its relatively low frequency. Results show that there were statistically significant differences between the two groups in the aforementioned tense choices (see Table 5.2), in particular:

- (1) NSs made significantly more past tense choices than NNSs,  $t(42) = 9.452, p < 0.001$
- (2) NNSs made significantly more present tense choices than NSs,  $t(42) = -7.464, p < 0.001$
- (3) NSs made significantly more BOTH choices than NNSs,  $t(42) = 2.894, p < .01$

**Table 5.2 Summary of t-test results: Part I Multiple choice tasks**

Tense choice	NS (N=22)	NNS (N=22)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> (2-tailed)
	Mean% ( <i>SD</i> )	Mean% ( <i>SD</i> )		
Past tense	44.70% (13.61)	24.24% (13.45)	9.452	<b>.000</b>
Present tense	28.28% (10.61)	60.86% (16.75)	-7.464	<b>.000</b>
Both	27.02% (16.20)	13.64% (14.42)	2.894	<b>.006</b>

Obviously, given the same set of prompts, the most frequent tense choice among NS respondents was the past tense whereas the most frequent choice among NNS respondents was the present tense. On average, NS informants showed a stronger preference for the past tense than their NNS counterparts. NS informants also made more BOTH choices than NNS informants, indicating a stronger preference for BOTH than NNS informants. NNS informants showed a stronger preference for the present tense than NS informants.

We now examine in detail the composition of tense choices for each respondent in order to conduct a finer analysis of inter-group and intra-group similarities and differences. Tables 5.3 and 5.4 present the responses given by each NS and NNS respondent in terms of frequency and percentage, respectively. We will first examine the proportion of past tense choice among NS and NNS respondents (Section 5.2.1.1), followed by that of the present tense (Section 5.2.1.2) and BOTH (Section 5.2.1.3)

**Table 5.3 Summary of tense choices for each respondent in the NS group: Part I**

Informant ID	Past tense F (%)	Present tense F (%)	Both F (%)	Not Sure F (%)	Total F (%)
1	11 (61.11%)	6(33.33%)	1(5.56%)	0	18(100%)
2	9 (50.00%)	5(27.78%)	4(22.22%)	0	18(100%)
3	9 (50.00%)	3(16.67%)	6(33.33%)	0	18(100%)
4	7 (38.89%)	4(22.22%)	7(38.89%)	0	18(100%)
5	9 (50.00%)	6(33.33%)	3(16.67%)	0	18(100%)
6	9 (50.00%)	5(27.78%)	4(22.22%)	0	18(100%)
7	2 (11.11%)	4(22.22%)	12(66.67%)	0	18(100%)

8	6 (33.33%)	4(22.22%)	8(44.44%)	0	18(100%)
9	3 (16.67%)	6(33.33%)	9(50.00%)	0	18(100%)
10	9 (50.00%)	4(22.22%)	5(27.78%)	0	18(100%)
11	10 (55.56%)	6(33.33%)	2(11.11%)	0	18(100%)
12	10 (55.56%)	6(33.33%)	2(11.11%)	0	18(100%)
13	8 (44.44%)	5(27.78%)	5(27.78%)	0	18(100%)
14	6 (33.33%)	7(38.89%)	5(27.78%)	0	18(100%)
15	9 (50.00%)	8(44.44%)	1(5.56%)	0	18(100%)
16	6 (33.33%)	4(22.22%)	8(44.44%)	0	18(100%)
17	9 (50.00%)	5 (27.78%)	4(22.22%)	0	18(100%)
18	7 (38.89%)	4(22.22%)	7(38.89%)	0	18(100%)
19	9 (50.00%)	3(16.67%)	6(33.33%)	0	18(100%)
20	8 (44.44%)	5(27.78%)	5(27.78%)	0	18(100%)
21	13 (72.22%)	2(11.11%)	3(16.67%)	0	18(100%)
22	7 (38.89%)	11(61.11%)	0(0.00%)	0	18(100%)
Total	177 (44.70%)	112(28.28%)	107(27.02%)	0	396 (100%)

**Table 5.4 Part I: Summary of tense choices for each respondent in the NNS group: Part I**

Informant ID	Past tense F (%)	Present tense F (%)	Both F (%)	Not Sure F (%)	Total F (%)
23	3 (16.67%)	14(77.78%)	1(5.56%)	0	18(100%)
24	3 (16.67%)	6(33.33%)	9(50.00%)	0	18(100%)
25	9 (50.00%)	9(50.00%)	0(0.00%)	0	18(100%)
26	2 (11.11%)	10(55.56%)	6(33.33%)	0	18(100%)
27	2 (11.11%)	11(61.11%)	5(27.78%)	0	18(100%)
28	2 (11.11%)	11(61.11%)	4(22.22%)	1	18(100%)
29	7 (38.89%)	11(61.11%)	0(0.00%)	0	18(100%)
30	2 (11.11%)	16(88.89%)	0(0.00%)	0	18(100%)
31	3 (16.67%)	15(83.33%)	0(0.00%)	0	18(100%)
32	7 (38.89%)	8(44.44%)	2(11.11%)	1	18(100%)
33	5 (27.78%)	12(66.67%)	1(5.56%)	0	18(100%)
34	5 (27.78%)	13(72.22%)	0(0.00%)	0	18(100%)
35	2 (11.11%)	10(55.56%)	6(33.33%)	0	18(100%)
36	2 (11.11%)	11(61.11%)	5(27.78%)	0	18(100%)
37	5 (27.78%)	12(66.67%)	1(5.56%)	0	18(100%)
38	8 (44.44%)	8(44.44%)	2(11.11%)	0	18(100%)
39	8 (44.44%)	6(33.33%)	4(22.22%)	0	18(100%)
40	3 (16.67%)	12(66.67%)	0(0.00%)	3	18(100%)
41	4 (22.22%)	13(72.22%)	1(5.56%)	0	18(100%)
42	8 (44.44%)	5(27.78%)	5(27.78%)	0	18(100%)
43	2 (11.11%)	15(83.33%)	1(5.56%)	0	18(100%)
44	4 (22.22%)	13(72.22%)	1(5.56%)	0	18(100%)
Total	96(24.24%)	241(60.86%)	54(13.64%)	5(1.26%)	396(100%)

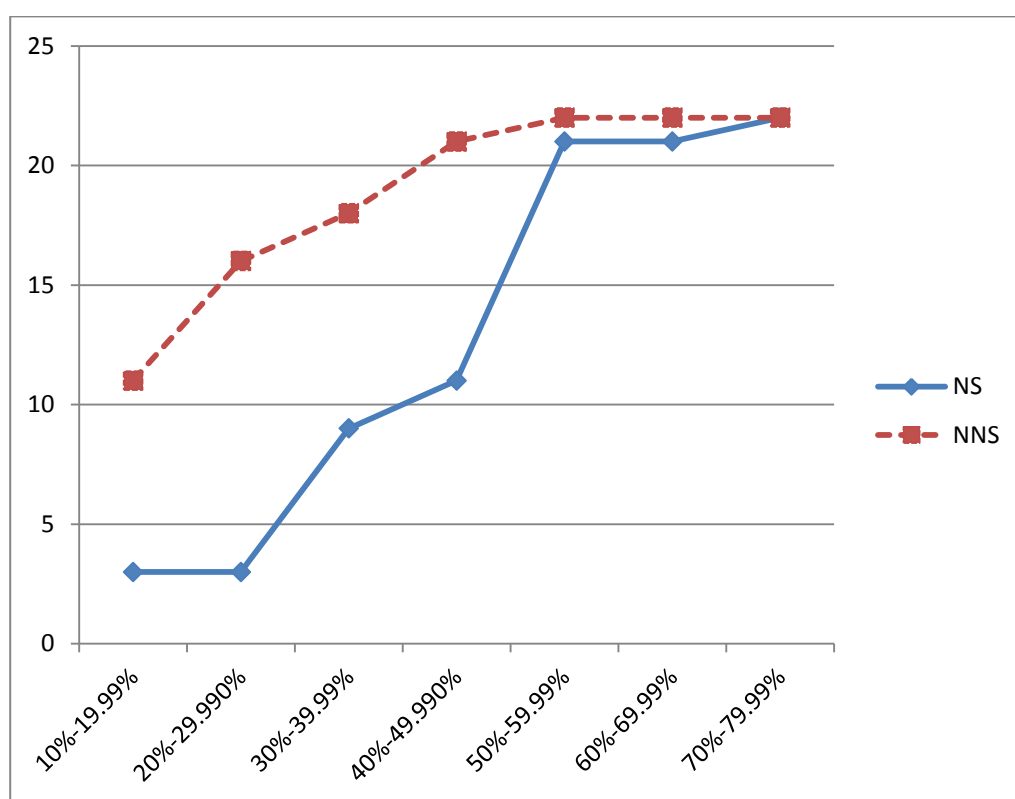
### **5.2.1.1 Analysis of proportions of the past tense choice**

In Part I, each respondent gave a total of 18 responses. With respect to the percentage of past tense among the 18 responses, the NS choices ranged from 11.11% to 72.22% whereas the NNS choices ranged from 11.11% to 50%. Table 5.5 presents the number of respondents according to the percentage of the past tense within each group. For example, three respondents in the NS group chose the past tense for 10%-19.99% of the time in contrast to 11 respondents in the NNS group.

**Table 5.5 Frequency distribution with respect to percentage of past tense choice: Part I**

Percentage of past tense choice	NS (N=22)	NNS (N=22)
10%-19.99%	3	11
20%-29.99%	0	5
30%-39.99%	6	2
40%-49.99%	2	3
50%-59.99%	10	1
60%-69.99%	0	0
70%-79.99%	1	0
Total	22	22

From Table 5.5 we can see that 11 respondents in the NS group chose past tense over 50% of the time, making up half of the NS group population. Ten of them chose past tense 50%-59.99% of the time. By contrast, only one respondent in the NNS group chose past tense over 50% of the time. In addition, 11 respondents in the NNS group chose past tense 10%-19.99% of the time, making up half of the NNS group population. Figure 5.1 below illustrates the cumulative frequency distribution according to past tense percentage for the NS group and the NNS group, respectively.



**Figure 5.1 Cumulative frequency distribution of past tense choice: Part I**

\*The vertical axis indicates the number of respondents. The horizontal axis indicates the percentage of past tense choice among the 18 responses for each respondent.

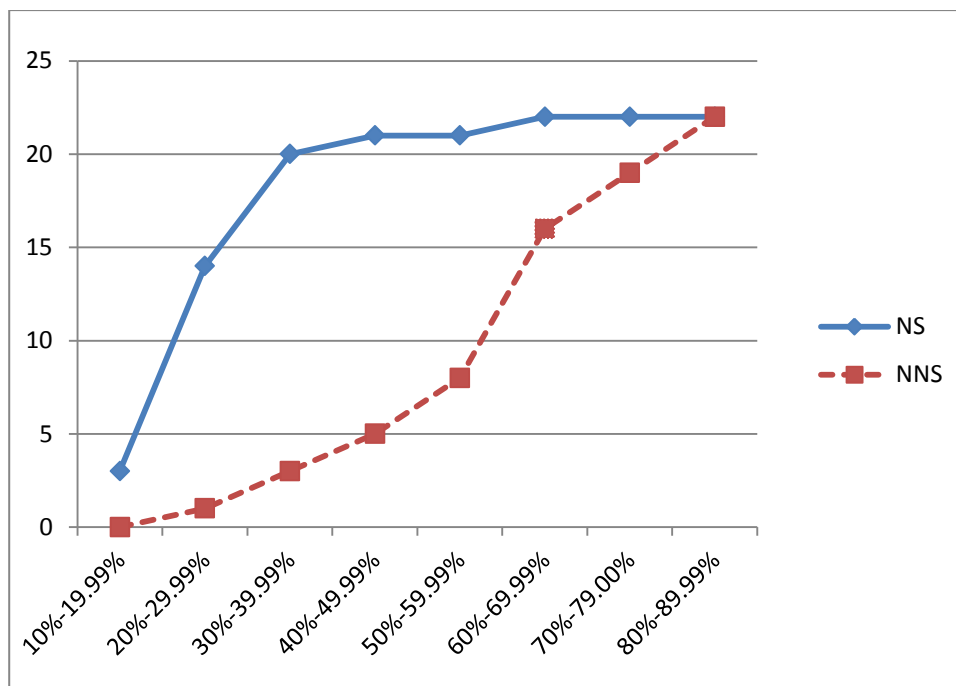
### ***5.2.1.2 Analysis of proportions of present tense choice***

With respect to the percentage of the present tense choices among 18 responses for each individual, the NS choices ranged from 11.11% to 61.11% whereas the NNS present tense choices ranged from 27.78% to 88.89%. Table 5.6 presents the number of respondents within each group according to their choices of the present tense by percentage.

**Table 5.6 Frequency distribution with respect to percentage of present tense choice: Part I**

Percentage of present tense choice	NS (N=22)	NNS (N=22)
10%-19.99%	3	0
20%-29.99%	11	1
30%-39.99%	6	2
40%-49.99%	1	2
50%-59.99%	0	3
60%-69.99%	1	8
70%-79.00%	0	3
80%-89.99%	0	3
Total	22	22

Table 5.6 shows that the majority of the NS group population – 21 NS respondents – chose present tense less than 50% of the time. Eleven of them chose the present tense 20%-29.99% of the time, making up half of the NS group population. By contrast, only five respondents in the NNS group chose the present tense less than 50% of the time. In other words, 17 respondents in the NNS group chose the present tense more than 50% of the time in contrast to one respondent in the NS group. Among the 17 NNS respondents, eight of them fell between 60%-69.99%, making up over one third of the NNS group population. Figure 5.2 below shows the cumulative frequency distribution for NS and NNS respondents according to the present tense percentage.

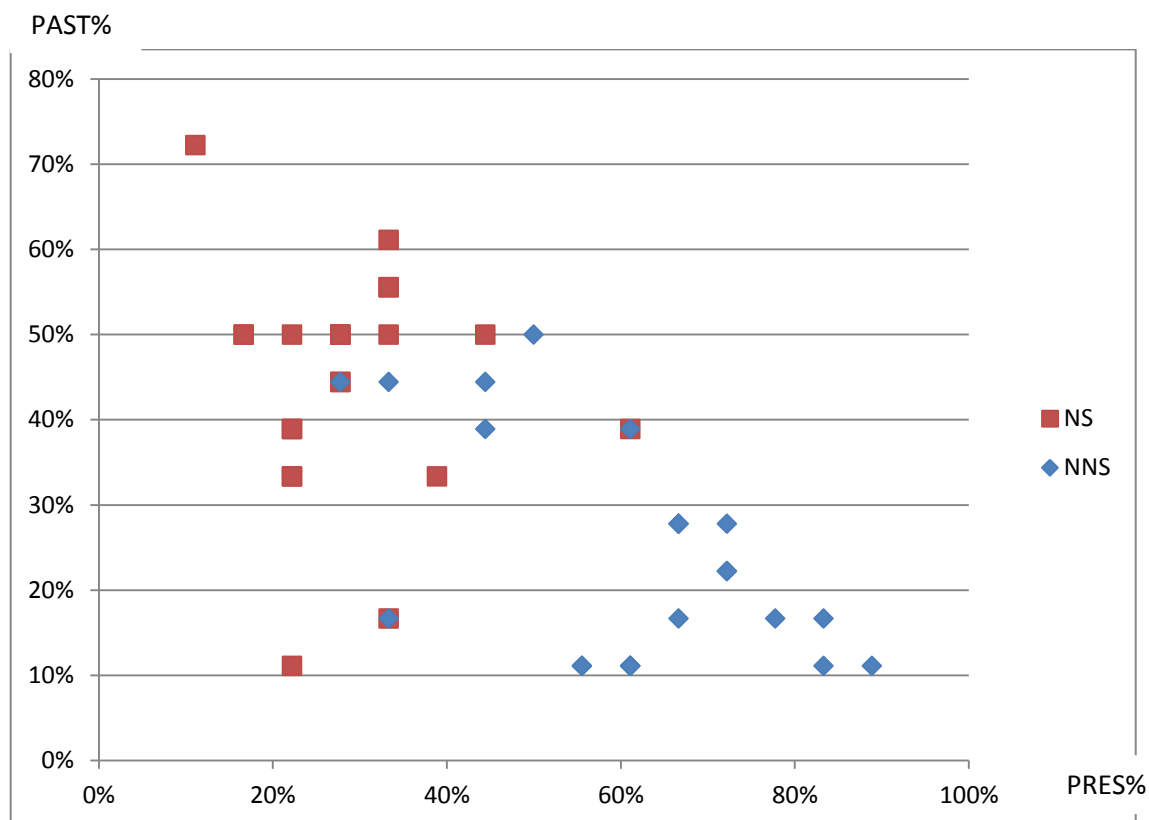


**Figure 5.2 Cumulative frequency distribution of present tense choice: Part I**

\*The vertical axis indicates the number of respondents. The horizontal axis indicates the percentage of present tense choice among the 18 responses for each respondent.

Figure 5.3 below shows the distribution of each NS and NNS respondent according to their respective percentage of present and past tense choices. The horizontal axis represents the percentage of present tense whereas the vertical axis represents the percentage of past tense choices. It is clear from Figure 5.3 that the NS group and NNS group cluster around different areas of the chart but with some overlapping, indicating that the relative proportions of present and past tense choices for many NS participants were distinct from those of NNS participants.





**Figure 5.3 Scatter plot of NSs and NNSs with respect to present and past tense choice**

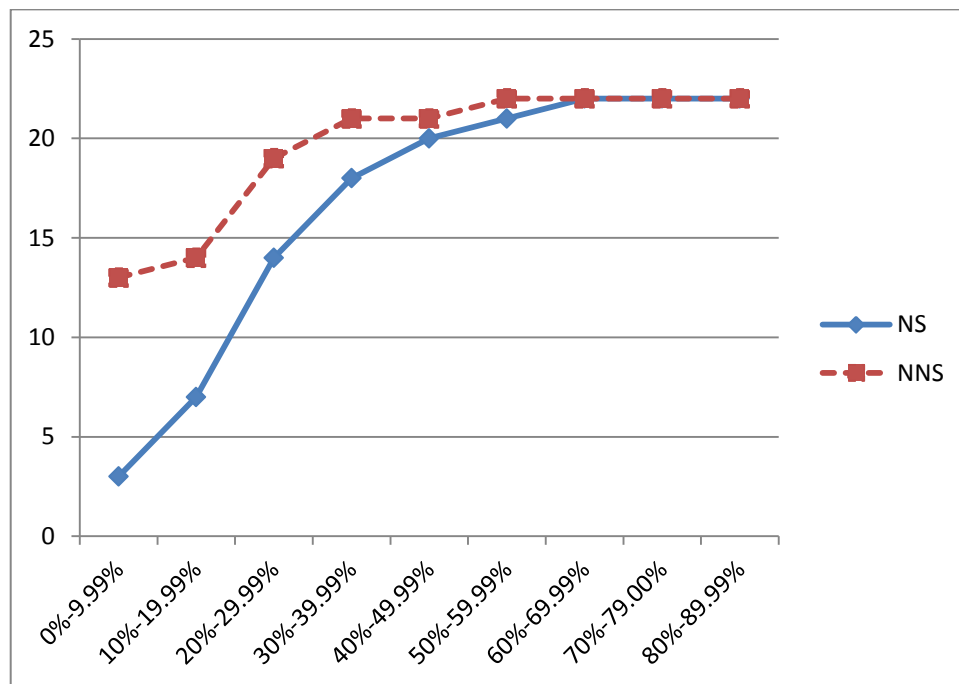
### **5.2.1.3 Analysis of proportions of BOTH choice**

With respect to the percentage of BOTH choices among 18 responses for each individual, the NS choices ranged from 0% to 66.67% whereas the NNS choices ranged from 0% to 50%. Table 5.7 below presents the number of respondents within each group according to the percentage of BOTH choices.

**Table 5.7 Frequency distribution with respect to percentage of BOTH choice: Part I**

Percentage of BOTH choice	NS (N=22)	NNS (N=22)
0%-9.99%	3	13
10%-19.99%	4	1
20%-29.99%	7	5
30%-39.99%	4	2
40%-49.99%	2	0
50%-59.99%	1	1
60%-69.99%	1	0
70%-79.00%	0	0
80%-89.99%	0	0
Total	22	22

From Tables 5.3 and 5.7 we can see that there were 21 respondents in the NS group whose choices of BOTH took up less than or equal to 50% of the total 18 responses. Seven of them fell between 20-29.99%, constituting nearly one third of the NS group population. Similarly, there were 21 respondents in the NNS group whose BOTH choices took up less than 50% of the total 18 responses, but 13 of them fell between 0-9.99% as opposed to three respondents in the same range, making up over half of the NS group population. In addition, six NNS respondents did not choose BOTH at all (See Table 5.4) as opposed to one respondent in the NS group (See Table 5.3). Figure 5.4 below shows the cumulative frequency distribution according to BOTH percentage for the NS group and the NNS group, respectively.



**Figure 5.4 Cumulative frequency distribution of BOTH choice: Part I**

\*The vertical axis indicates the number of respondents. The horizontal axis indicates the percentage of BOTH choice among the 18 responses for each respondent.

#### **5.2.1.4 Analysis of tense choice for each prompt – Part I: Multiple choice tasks**

Chi-square tests for independence were conducted to compare the choices made by NSs and NNSs for each prompt. Significant differences were found between the two groups with regard to 10 prompts out of a total of 18. Table 5.8 presents the chi-square results for each prompt. An asterisk indicates statistical significance.

**Table 5.8 Chi-square results for each prompt in Part I: Multiple choice tasks**

No.	Prompts
	Chi-square results
#1.1*	<p>The animal you saw _____ a possum; see, there he is running up a tree.</p> <p><math>\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 15.092, p=.001</math></p>

#1.2	<p>The animal you saw _____ a possum; this picture in the guidebook proves it.</p> <p><math>\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 3.640, p&gt;.05</math></p>
#1.3*	<p>Anna: When I was with you at the shop today, I spoke to that really cute assistant. But I don't remember what colour eyes he <u>  3  </u>.</p>
#1.4*	<p><i>Beth might answer Anna in two ways:</i></p>
#1.5*	<p>Beth: I remember! He <u>  4  </u> blue eyes.</p> <p>Beth: I remember! The boy you spoke to <u>  5  </u> blue eyes.</p> <p>3. <math>\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 25.333, p=.000</math></p> <p>4. <math>\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 16.227, p=.000</math></p> <p>5. <math>\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 17.776, p=.000</math></p>
#1.6	<p>Anna: I spoke to a boy on the phone today. I wonder what colour eyes he <u>  6  </u>.</p>
#1.7	<p>Beth: Well, I don't have a clue either.</p>
#1.8	<p>Anna: Maybe you know him...his name is Harry Smith.</p> <p><i>Beth might answer Anna in two ways:</i></p> <p>Beth: Oh, Harry Smith! The boy you spoke to <u>  7  </u> blue eyes.</p> <p>Beth: Oh, Harry Smith! He <u>  8  </u> blue eyes.</p> <p>6. <math>\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 4.342, p&gt;.05</math></p> <p>7. <math>\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 1.333, p&gt;.05</math></p> <p>8. <math>\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 1.023, p&gt;.05</math></p>
#1.9	<p>Shakespeare _____ a renowned playwright.</p> <p><math>\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 3.099, p&gt;.05</math></p>
#1.10	<p>Shakespeare _____ a notorious drunkard.</p> <p><math>\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 5.641, p&gt;.05</math></p>
#1.11*	<p>[<i>Coming out of the theatre</i>]</p> <p>“Gee, that _____ a great movie! I'm sure it will win an award. ”</p> <p><math>\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 18.596, p=.000</math></p>
#1.12	<p>It _____ an excellent movie. It is a masterpiece of cinematic art.</p>

	$\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 3.088, p>.05$
#1.13	[The speaker, who is at a flea market, is trying to explain why she bought the second-hand item she is holding.] It _____ have any stains on it. $\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 5.356, p>.05$
#1.14*	I'm sorry we left Chester. It _____ such a nice place. $\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 11.333, p<.01$
#1.15*	A: Did you see the house we just passed? B: No. What about it? A: It _____ a green and orange roof. $\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 33.222, p=.000$
#1.16*	Ann: Do you remember that Danish family we met in Majorca last summer? Bob: You mean Kirsten and Ole? They _____ not Danish; they _____ Norwegian. $\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 23.644, p=.000$
#1.17*	Apart from Roger Federer, who _____ the last male No. 1 seed to win the Grand Slam title? $\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 11.216, p<.05$
#1.18*	"I'm sorry," she said, "but I told Mr. Martin yesterday that we _____ not thinking of selling." $\chi^2 (1, n=44) = 10.624, p=.005$

Note: \* indicates statistical significance.

Table 5.9 below summarizes the frequencies of different tense choices with regard to each prompt for the NS group and the NNS group, respectively. Chi-square results are presented as well.

**Table 5.9 Summary of frequencies for different tense choices with regard to each prompt**

Prompts	Tense choice	NS (N=22)	NNS (N=22)	$\chi^2$	$p$ (2-tailed)
No.		Frequency	Frequency		
#1.1	PAST	12	3	15.09	<b>.001</b>
	PRES	2	14		

	BOTH	8	5		
#1.2	PAST	17	12	3.640	.162
	PRES	1	5		
	BOTH	4	5		
#1.3	PAST	17	4	25.333	<b>.000</b>
	PRES	0	16		
	BOTH	5	2		
#1.4	PAST	15	5	16.227	<b>.000</b>
	PRES	2	15		
	BOTH	5	2		
#1.5	PAST	18	5	17.776	<b>.000</b>
	PRES	1	13		
	BOTH	3	4		
#1.6	PAST	1	5	4.342	.114
	PRES	21	16		
	BOTH	0	1		
#1.7	PAST	2	4	1.333	.513
	PRES	16	16		
	BOTH	4	2		
#1.8	PAST	0	0	1.023	.312
	PRES	22	21		
	BOTH	0	1		
#1.9	PAST	2	3	3.099	.377

	PRES	9	12		
	BOTH	11	6		
	NOT SURE	0	1		
#1.10	PAST	22	17	5.641	.060
	PRES	0	0		
	BOTH	0	4		
	NOT SURE	0	1		
#1.11	PAST	14	5	18.596	<b>.000</b>
	PRES	0	13		
	BOTH	8	4		
#1.12	PAST	0	0	3.088	.079
	PRES	17	21		
	BOTH	5	1		
#1.13	PAST	5	1	5.356	.069
	PRES	11	18		
	BOTH	6	3		
#1.14	PAST	3	6	11.333	<b>.003</b>
	PRES	3	11		
	BOTH	16	5		
#1.15	PAST	17	1	33.222	<b>.000</b>
	PRES	1	19		
	BOTH	4	1		
	NOT SURE	0	1		

#1.16	PAST	7	2	23.644	<b>.000</b>
	PRES	2	18		
	BOTH	13	2		
#1.17	PAST	19	9	11.216	<b>.011</b>
	PRES	1	8		
	BOTH	2	3		
	NOT SURE	0	2		
#1.18	PAST	5	14	10.624	<b>.005</b>
	PRES	4	5		
	BOTH	13	3		

Note: Boldface indicates statistical significance.

### 5.2.2 Quantitative results for Part II: Acceptability judgement tasks

Both Parts II and III were acceptability judgement tasks. In Part II, respondents were asked to rate the acceptability of underlined tense uses on a 7-point scale, ranging from -1(i.e., completely unacceptable) to 5 (i.e., very natural) with 0 indicating “can’t decide”.

T-tests were conducted for each prompt in order to compare the scores given by NSs and NNSs. Significant differences were found in seven out of a total of 14 prompts (See Table 5.10).

**Table 5.10 T-test results for each prompt in Part II: Acceptability judgement tasks**

No.	Prompts in Part II	t-test results (2-tailed)
#2.1*	My daughter’s father <u>was</u> Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven’t seen him in years.	$t(42)=3.201$ $p < .01$
#2.2	My daughter’s father <u>is</u> Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven’t seen him in years.	$t(42)=-.624$ $p > .05$
#2.3*	Mother: Your Sherri's late.	$t(42)=6.343$



#2.4*	Son: Mum...Sherri and I broke up.  Mother: Not Sherri? I <u>liked</u> Sherri. I <u>didn't</u> like the other girls you brought home.	$p < .001$ $t(42)=7.477$ $p < .001$
#2.5*	Mother: Your Sherri's late.	$t(42)=-3.867$
#2.6*	Son: Mum...Sherri and I broke up.  Mother: Not Sherri? I <u>like</u> Sherri. I <u>don't</u> like the other girls you brought home.	$p < .001$ $t(42)=-4.374$ $p < .001$
#2.7	Smith (1980) <u>argued</u> that Britain is no longer a country in which freedom of speech is seriously maintained.	$t(42)=.886$ $p > .05$
#2.8	Smith (1980) <u>argues</u> that Britain is no longer a country in which freedom of speech is seriously maintained.	$t(42)=1.875$ $p > .05$
#2.9	What you just stepped on <u>was</u> a nettle.	$t(42)=1.503$ $p > .05$
#2.10	What you just stepped on <u>is</u> a nettle.	$t(42)=-.824$ $p > .05$
#2.11*	They were very tired, because the slope they were climbing <u>was</u> steep.	$t(42)=2.109$ $p < .05$
#2.12	They were very tired, because the slope they were climbing <u>is</u> steep.	$t(42)=.344$ $p > .05$
#2.13*	In 1837, Dickens <u>completes</u> the <i>Pickwick Papers</i> . They <u>are</u> enthusiastically received by many critics. He <u>moves</u> to York and <u>marries</u> his grand-niece Joan. In 1838, they <u>are</u> divorced again.	$t(42)=7.099$ $p < .001$
#2.14	In 1837, Dickens <u>completed</u> the <i>Pickwick Papers</i> . They <u>were</u> enthusiastically received by many critics. He <u>moved</u> to York and <u>married</u> his grand-niece Joan. In 1838, they <u>were</u> divorced again.	$t(42)=-.463$ $p > .05$

Note: \*indicates statistical significance.

Table 5.11 below summarizes in detail the mean scores and standard deviation for each prompt in the NS group and NNS group, respectively.

**Table 5.11 Summary of scores in NS and NNS groups in Part II: Acceptability judgement**

Prompts	NS (N=22)	NNS (N=22)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> (2-tailed)
	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )		
#2.1	2.23(2.287)	.27 (1.723)	3.201	<b>.003</b>
#2.2	4.68(.839)	4.82(.588)	-.624	.536
#2.3	3.91(2.180)	.23(1.631)	6.343	<b>.000</b>
#2.4	4.55(1.299)	.91(1.875)	7.477	<b>.000</b>
#2.5	3.36(1.255)	4.73(1.077)	-3.867	<b>.000</b>
#2.6	1.95(2.299)	4.50(1.472)	-4.374	<b>.000</b>
#2.7	3.91(1.925)	3.36(2.150)	.886	.380
#2.8	4.23(1.270)	3.32(1.887)	1.875	.068
#2.9	4.09(1.571)	3.18(2.363)	1.503	.140
#2.10	3.05(1.864)	3.50(1.793)	-.824	.414
#2.11	4.86(.351)	4.05(1.786)	2.109	<b>.041</b>
#2.12	1.77(2.202)	1.55(2.176)	.344	.732
#2.13	3.32(1.585)	-.05(1.558)	7.099	<b>.000</b>
#2.14	4.68(1.287)	4.82(.501)	-.463	.646

Note: Boldface indicates statistical significance.

Table 5.12 below summarizes the ratings given by NSs and NNSs groups for each particular prompt in Part II.

**Table 5.12 Distribution of ratings for NS and NNS groups: Part II Acceptability judgement**

Prompt No.	Groups	Scale values							Total F
		-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	
		F	F	F	F	F	F	F	
#2.1*	NS(N=22)	6	0	1	2	7	1	5	22
	NNS(N=22)	13	0	4	1	3	1	0	22
#2.2	NS(N=22)	0	0	0	1	2	0	19	22
	NNS(N=22)	0	0	0	0	2	0	20	22
#2.3*	NS(N=22)	3	0	1	0	0	2	16	22
	NNS(N=22)	11	3	4	2	1	0	1	22
#2.4*	NS(N=22)	1	0	0	0	0	4	17	22
	NNS(N=22)	7	3	5	3	2	0	2	22
#2.5*	NS(N=22)	0	0	1	5	7	3	6	22
	NNS(N=22)	0	1	0	0	0	1	20	22
#2.6*	NS(N=22)	6	0	4	2	4	1	5	22
	NNS(N=22)	0	2	0	0	0	1	19	22
#2.7	NS(N=22)	2	0	0	3	1	1	15	22
	NNS(N=22)	2	2	0	2	4	2	12	22
#2.8	NS(N=22)	0	0	1	2	3	1	15	22
	NNS(N=22)	1	2	1	1	6	2	9	22
#2.9	NS(N=22)	0	1	2	0	3	1	15	22
	NNS(N=22)	2	3	2	1	0	2	12	22
#2.10	NS(N=22)	1	1	3	3	5	1	8	22

	NNS(N=22)	1	2	0	0	7	3	9	22
#2.11*	NS(N=22)	0	0	0	0	0	3	19	22
	NNS(N=22)	2	0	0	0	3	3	14	22
#2.12	NS(N=22)	6	0	5	2	4	1	4	22
	NNS(N=22)	7	0	5	1	5	1	3	22
#2.13*	NS(N=22)	1	0	1	4	6	3	7	22
	NNS(N=22)	15	1	1	2	3	0	0	22
#2.14	NS(N=22)	1	0	0	0	0	1	20	22
	NNS(N=22)	0	0	0	0	1	2	19	22

With regard to the choice of “can’t decide”, there were two occasions in the NS group where the same respondent couldn’t decide for #2.9 and #2.10 whereas there were 19 occasions in the NNS group in which eight respondents couldn’t decide for a variety of prompts (#2.3, #2.4, #2.5, #2.6, #2.7, #2.8, #2.9, #2.10, #2.13).

### 5.2.3 Quantitative results for Part III: Acceptability judgement tasks

Part III was acceptability judgement task. Informants were asked to order four different versions of the same joke in terms of naturalness, with 1 indicating the most natural and 4 the least natural. T-tests were conducted for each version in order to compare the scores given by the NS and the NNS group. Significant difference was found for the past tense version between the two groups. Table 5.13 below presents the t-test results for each version.

**Table 5.13 T-test results for NS and NNS groups: Part III**

Prompts No.	NS (N=22)	NNS (N=22)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> (2-tailed)
	Mean( <i>SD</i> )	Mean( <i>SD</i> )		
# 3.1Past tense	1.600 (.5982)	1.136 (.3155)	3.096	<b>.004</b>
#3.2 Present tense	1.800(.9234)	2.023 (.4995)	-.959	.346
#3.3 Switch from present to past tense	3.575(.5200)	3.591 (.3322)	-.119	.906
#3.4 Switch from past to present tense	2.975 (.7860)	3.250(.5722)	-1.305	.119

Note: Boldface indicates statistical significance.

Table 5.13 shows that for both groups the most natural version was #3.1 (the past tense) and the least natural one was #3.3 (switching from present to past tense.)

ANOVA tests were conducted to compare the four means representing different versions for the NS group and the NNS group, respectively. Significant differences were found for both groups. For the NS group,  $F(3, 84) = 34.061$ ,  $p = .000$  (see Table 5.14); for the NNS group,  $F(3, 84) = 143.158$ ,  $p = .000$  (see Table 5.15).

**Table 5.14 ANOVA summary table for the NS group: Part III**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	53.613	3	17.871	34.061	.000
Within Groups	39.875	84	.525		
Total	93.488	87			

**Table 5.15 ANOVA summary table for the NNS group: Part III**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	84.477	3	28.159	143.158	.000
Within Groups	16.523	84	.197		
Total	101.000	87			

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD indicated that for the NS group, there were no significant differences between the past tense and the present tense versions, or between the two versions containing tense switches. Significant differences were found between the past tense version and the two versions containing switches in both directions as well as between the present version and the two versions containing switches in both directions (see Table 5.16).

**Table 5.16 Post hoc Tukey HSD analysis for the NS group: Part III**

(I) TENSES	(J) TENSES	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
PAST	PRESENT	-.20000	.22906	.819
	PRESENT to PAST	-1.97500*	.22906	.000
	PAST to PRESENT	-1.37500*	.22906	.000
PRESENT	PAST	.20000	.22906	.819
	PRESENT to PAST	-1.77500*	.22906	.000
	PAST to PRESENT	-1.17500*	.22906	.000
PRESENT to PAST	PAST	1.97500*	.22906	.000
	PRESENT	1.77500*	.22906	.000
	PAST to PRESENT	.60000	.22906	.051
PAST to PRESENT	PAST	1.37500*	.22906	.000
	PRESENT	1.17500*	.22906	.000
	PRESENT to PAST	-.60000	.22906	.051

\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

For the NNS group, significant differences were found between each of the four versions except for between the last two versions containing tense switches in both directions (See Table 5.17).

**Table 5.17 Post hoc Tukey HSD analysis for the NNS group: Part III**

(I) TENSES	(J) TENSES	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
PAST	PRESENT	-.88636*	.13372	.000
	PRESENT to PAST	-2.45455*	.13372	.000
	PAST to PRESENT	-2.11364*	.13372	.000
PRESENT	PAST	.88636*	.13372	.000
	PRESENT to PAST	-1.56818*	.13372	.000
	PAST to PRESENT	-1.22727*	.13372	.000
PRESENT to PAST	PAST	2.45455*	.13372	.000
	PRESENT	1.56818*	.13372	.000
	PAST to PRESENT	.34091	.13372	.060
PAST to PRESENT	PAST	2.11364*	.13372	.000
	PRESENT	1.22727*	.13372	.000
	PRESENT to PAST	-.34091	.13372	.060

\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The post hoc analyses suggest that both the present tense and the past tense were equally acceptable for the NS respondents. By contrast, for the NNS respondents, the past tense was statistically more acceptable than the present tense.

Although no significant differences were found between the last two versions which contained tense switches in both directions, the results of Tukey HSD comparison show that the mean difference was greater in the NS group than in the NNS group, suggesting that to a certain extent, the switch from present to past tense was less acceptable for NS informants than the switch in the reverse order.

## 5.3 Qualitative results

This section deals with qualitative results from the retrospective interview and the comments obtained in the course of the survey. We here address the third research question, viz. what are some of the factors affecting acceptability judgements and interpretations, by reporting how NS and NNS informants spoke for themselves about their understanding of specific uses of the English present and past tenses.

The interviews with the NS respondents generally lasted longer (between one hour and one and half hours) than those with the NNS respondents (averaged half an hour) because the former provided richer data in response to the researcher's questions. The interview responses were mainly elicited by means of a set of control questions, described earlier in Section 4.4, which aimed to encourage participants to reflect on their performance in the survey. Informants often went beyond the researcher's question during the interview. The elicited responses as well as spontaneous responses thereby represented NS and NNS perceptions of factors associated with English tense meanings and uses. Combined together, they could be taken to reflect genuine perceptions rather than simply ideas triggered by the question itself.

Sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2 present NS and NNS perceptions, respectively. As will be shown below, substantial qualitative differences were found between responses given by NS and NNS informants. Later, in Section 5.4, I will combine qualitative and quantitative results to gain a general understanding of the four types of tense usage at issue.

### 5.3.1 NS perceptions of tense meanings and uses

Three key factors emerged from the NS verbal reports and comments. I will illustrate them by turn mainly using the NS responses to the following pair of prompts.

#2.1 My daughter's father <u>was</u> Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years.	#2.2 My daughter's father <u>is</u> Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years.
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#### 5.3.1.1 Assumed personal relationship

One of the determining causes for NS tense choices was assumed personal relationship. We can see from the following responses that this interpersonal contextual factor plays an important part in #2.1 and #2.2.



ID 16: “The speaker’s **relationship with the topic** modifies the tense of the sentence.”

ID 2: “Past tense emphasizes **lack of relationship to him now**.”

ID 17: “Because he has **broken up with her** and **the mother is not likely to see him again**, the past tense is probably just a little better, but both are ok.”

ID 3: “The first sentence in the past tense would be acceptable if he was **completely out of the picture**. The second sentence negates this possibility, though.”

ID 20: “The woman **could have had a very negative relationship with him**, and therefore she wants to indicate **he is no longer part of her life**, in which case she deliberately chooses that past tense form.”

ID 1: “He is **out of her life**.”

There were intra-group disagreements among NNSs as to whether the relationship between the speaker and her ex-husband was perceived as already finished or still ongoing, see below.

ID 4: “He **stays in contact**, present tense.”

#### 5.3.1.2 Objective existence of the actor in focus

The second factor which is believed to affect NS tense choices is objective existence of the actor who is referred to. In #2.1 and #2.2, the fact that the ex-husband is still alive and still remains Brazilian matters to some NS respondents.

ID 10: “Past tense is completely wrong because the second sentence clearly shows **the father is still alive**.”

ID 6: “He is **still alive, still Brazilian!**”

One respondent thought it was rude to talk about someone who was alive in the past tense.

ID 20: “So to me, past tense is **potentially rude** if I said, um, anyone who is alive today, you know.... **I just think that’s rude**.”

And she went on to explain that the present tense seemed to be grammatically correct, but past tense could be chosen to indicate that the speaker intended to psychologically distance her ex-husband.

“You know, **grammatically**, it seems to me it should be present tense. So this present tense seems to **be correct**. But you could choose this past tense to **emphasize that her attitude**,

*which is negative, he is out of her life, he's no longer part of my life, distancing him so to speak."*

### **5.3.1.3 Change of external circumstances**

The third factor contributing to NS tense choices is associated with the issue of change of external circumstances. Some NS informants were concerned with whether the ex-husband has changed his nationality or not and the use of past tense suggests change.

ID 8: *"Past tense suggests that he was Brazilian **but is no longer**. He may have changed nationality since then."*

ID 12: *"Past tense is only acceptable **if he has changed his nationality** since leaving."*

ID 7: *"He may have changed his nationality!"*

ID 22: *"The father's **nationality has not changed**."*

Note that these three factors are not necessarily mutually exclusive to each other. Some NS informants took them into consideration at the same time. For example:

ID 14: *"The father remains Brazilian; contact is still on-going. Present tense."*

ID 6: *"He stays in contact, present tense, still alive, still Brazilian!"*

In fact they may be subsumed under the same criterion: "no longer". The various NS responses could be interpreted as *"He is no longer part of her life or conceived as such"* (personal relationship), *"He is no longer alive"* (objective existence) or *"He is no longer Brazilian"* (change of state). We suggest that in the minds of NS respondents, they constitute different aspects of the same underlying factor which compete with one another.

### **5.3.1.4 Other features of the NS responses**

NS informants certainly provided more information than their NNS counterparts regarding their understanding of English meanings and uses. Sometimes they could add their own examples, for instance, one respondent provided a similar example to #2.1 and #2.2, see below:

ID 14: *"My hairdresser's ex-husband and father of her 3 daughters, was/is Thai. Her daughters, now in their 20's, see their father regularly. I think she uses was/is when speaking of events, either seems quite natural."*

Several NS informants reflected on how they felt about the survey in general. Some of them thought the prompts were interesting; some found it hard to justify their responses. Still others expressed that their tense behaviour were influenced by schooling. The role of education in participants' attitudes towards tense uses, especially with respect to tense usage in academic citations, will be discussed further in Section 5.4.

ID 14: *“Very interesting points I had not thought about before. English language is quite ridiculous!”*

ID 20: *“What I found quite embarrassed about was that, you know, I’m a trained English language teacher, of course, but this stuff, the questions you asked me about is all intuition, and trying to explain it is unbelievably difficult. I can say to you that that’s acceptable, that’s not acceptable. But if you say why, it’s very hard to find reasons to justify, you know, ‘cause I think that’s probably just the nature of your intuition as a native speaker of the language. And it’s embarrassing, you think, you know, I should be able to come up with an explanation or justification, but I couldn’t do it. But you feel that as an English language speaker, you should be able to come up with a reason. I’m sure the grammar books probably have some, but it’s HARD. Mostly what I did with your survey was I said them out loud. I had to say them out loud and try out whether it’s OK or not OK. And I found that phonology played a little bit of the part, ‘cause this one word “is” or “was”, where if you say naturally, you can’t actually tell if it is “is” or “was”, and they were both acceptable, I think, you know, not necessarily because of a phonological similarity, but it seems to play a part. So, yes, interesting.”*

Another respondent showed disagreement with the above comment:

ID 10: *“I wouldn’t entirely agree. I do think it is difficult, because very often you can say they’re both acceptable. But usually, when you look at it more carefully, there are reasons in many cases, not in all, but in many cases as I said in my answers, you can relate it to two things, you can relate it to tense and you can relate it to grammar. I suppose, having been born in 1930, when that was traditional Scottish and English schooling because I went to school in both countries when I was young. In those days, I suppose teachers were tougher on the grammar, they insisted that you wrote, certainly speaking, but particularly written, you really did have to use your grammar. So my basis of approach is probably different from this person, who may be a lot younger than me. And I’m influenced by my schooling. I agree with her about intuition, but I relate it for grammatical reasons very often to tense. And that guides me.”*

This particular respondent was very sensitive to being “grammatically correct” in his justification, and emphasized the factor of “being logical” as the test of grammatical correctness. Obviously this participant was trying to adhere to his own preconceived theory or hypothesis (which was unfortunately not applicable to all the prompts) in justifying the tense choices he had made. This defensive self-consciousness was so strong that sometimes he stuck to his “belief” at the cost of distorting his actual behaviour (i.e. the choices he had already made). For instance, with respect to # 2.7 (the past tense) and #2.8 (the present tense), which are related to tense usage in academic citations, he reported that *“I don’t like either, because we are left uncertain whether Smith is alive or dead. He could be dead in #2.7, but we don’t know. #2.8 is OK if Smith is still alive, but again we don’t know!”* He seemed to contradict himself in his response to Q 4.2 that *“Where an author is dead at the time I am writing, I prefer to use the past tense, though use of the present tense is sometimes permissible.”*

### 5.3.2 NNS perceptions of tense meanings and uses

In this section, I analyse the salient features that emerge from the NNS responses, listing three factors as key influences on Chinese learners’ tense choices and interpretations. The first two correspond to NS perceptions while the last seems to be particular to Chinese learners of English. Note that the factor of assumed personal relationship is absent in the NNS responses.

#### 5.3.2.1 Change of circumstances

Change of circumstances seems to be an overriding factor in making tense choices for Chinese learners. In #2.1, many NNS respondents expressed concern with the ex-husband state of being Brazilian.

ID 24: *“Past tense sounds ok in the situation that the man **changed his nationality.**”*

ID 27: *“As I heard from Suzanna, he is **now naturalized American.**”*

In another prompt # 1.13, change of circumstances can denote change of speaker’s knowledge rather than change of objective state, see below:

ID 24: *“Past tense is possible when, for example, **the speaker didn’t see the stains when she checked it before buying it, and she is aware they are there now.**”*

#### 5.3.2.2 Objective existence of the actor in focus

Some NNS respondents directly related the use of the past tense to dead people, as in #2.1:

ID 32: “Past tense indicates the person being talked about is **dead**, which is clearly not the case as shown by the second sentence.”

Some Chinese learners chose NOT SURE when confronted with conflicting factors, as in #1.7:

ID 40: “The house is **out of sight**, therefore present tense is inappropriate; but as colour of the roof is **an objective fact** which does **not change normally**, so the present tense can be used. So I chose NOT SURE.”

### 5.3.2.3 General vs. Specific situations

The contrast between general and specific situations was manifested in two contexts: type vs. instance and general truth vs. past experience, in which present tense was associated with general situations whereas past tense was associated with particular situations.

One NNS respondent chose BOTH for # 1.2, and went on to explain that:

ID 24: “The present tense suggests **a general fact about this type of animal**, whereas the past tense limits the truth of the proposition to the moment of seeing (which is prior to the time of utterance) and to **the particular animal** that was seen.”

The same respondent, however, chose the present tense for #1.1, the contrasting prompt, for a different reason: “The possum is in front of you, **now and here for present tense**.”

The second pertains to whether the sentence is used to describe general truth or past experience. For example, for the contrasting pair # 1.11 and #1.12, one NNS informant indicates that:

ID 26: “Past tense refers to the speaker’s **past experience of watching the movie**. Present tense indicates **the general truth** as the speaker believes it.”

### 5.3.2.4 Other features of the NNS responses

One other pronounced feature in the NNS responses was represented by a number of metalinguistic and lingua-cultural preconceptions that were invoked to justify or challenge tense meanings and uses. Three such perceptions can be distinguished.

- a) The first was that tense use in everyday English was regarded as rather causal. For example, one NNS informant (ID 40), a tertiary-level English teacher herself with a Master’s degree in TESOL obtained in U.S. and a PhD degree in second language

acquisition, remarked repeatedly that “*In oral English, tense use is **informal**. It doesn’t matter which tense is used.*” And she was not alone in this view.

- b) Conversely, a more typical and common reaction was that English tense was very difficult to master, as evident in the response of another tertiary-level English teacher (ID 33) with a Master’s degree in second language acquisition: “*Tenses are soooooooooo confusing! I did most questions out of my intuition. To me, it’s quite difficult to tell the subtle differences and state the reasons.*”
- c) However the third perception was that the present tense is the unmarked or default choice whereas the use of past tense involves more mental processing than the present tense. Evidence of this view can be found in the following responses:

ID 35: “*Present tense **takes less effort**.*”

ID 40: “*Past tense is **redundant** for #1.3, as in normal circumstances the eyes won’t change colour. So present tense is **enough**.*”

This last perception may contribute to the fact that the NNS informants were more reluctant to use the past tense than NS informants with regard to certain prompts, as demonstrated in Section 5.2, in which Chinese learners in general showed a stronger preference for the present tense than native speakers.

There were some other features in the NNS responses which appeared to be unique to Chinese learners. One of them concerned the order of the prompts. One NNS respondent (ID 30) noted that her choices in Part I might be affected by the order of presentation of sample texts in the prompts. In particular, she said, her choices might have been different if the contrasting pairs were mixed with other prompts instead of being put next to each other. She said that she was tempted to choose different tenses for the prompts in a contrasting pair.

## 5.4 Analysis with respect to the four types of tense usage

We now address the first two research questions posed earlier in Sections 1.6 and 4.1, i.e., the intergroup and intragroup differences with respect to the four types of tense usage under discussion. The last two research questions regarding alternative construals characteristic to NSs and NNSs and L1 conceptual transfer will be discussed in Section 5.5.

Both quantitative and qualitative results are incorporated in our analysis. Qualitative analyses in Section 5.3 have revealed differences between the two groups as to what specific factors were taken into consideration when the respondents made acceptability judgements and interpretations.

Here we will illustrate and supplement the factors outlined in Section 5.3 based on evidence drawn from more prompts and finer analyses.

I will compare the NS and NNS participants with respect to their acceptability judgements and interpretations in terms of the four types of tense usage of interest, viz. the non-completive past tense (Section 5.4.1), dual perspective (Section 5.4.2), tense used in citing others' work (Section 5.4.3) and historical present and present/past alternation (Section 5.4.4). In each section below, we will start with analysing the NS responses, followed by the NNS responses. Our analyses indicate differences as well as similarities between the two groups. The analyses also demonstrate considerable intra-group variations with respect to each of the four types of tense usage.

#### 5.4.1 The non-completive past tense

In Section 5.2.1.4, we have demonstrated that there were statistically significant differences between NS and NNS responses with respect to the following prompts: #1.1, #1.2, #1.3, #1.4, #1.5, #1.11, #1.15, #1.16, #2.1 #2.3-2.4, #2.5-2.6, #2.11, which were classified as the non-completive past.

With respect to the prompts associated with past time memory, i.e., #1.3-#1.5 (see below) and #1.16, a pragmatic variable has been identified. This variable is associated with the existence of an ongoing personal relationship between the speaker and the person under discussion (see Section 5.3.1.1). In #1.3-#1.5, we think a new variable comes into play here.

#1.3-#1.5

Anna: When I was with you at the shop today, I spoke to that really cute assistant. But I don't remember what colour eyes he 1.3.

*Beth might answer Anna in two ways:*

Beth: I remember! He 1.4 blue eyes.

Beth: I remember! The boy you spoke to 1.5 blue eyes.

The new variable is related to the speaker's assumption, particularly, his or her subjective expectation of seeing the person under discussion again in the future. Such an assumption was exhibited in remarks like "*Anna may hope to meet him again!*"; "*BOTH are OK but I would tend*

to use past tense if it is someone I don't **intend to see again** – event is over"; "present tense if I **expected to see the shop assistant again**".

The new variable is then related to epistemic probability, and by extension, to counterfactual modality, as shown in remarks like "*If I **wasn't likely to see them again**, I would say 'had'.*" We hence term it the epistemic factor, which is distinct essentially from the factor of ongoing personal relationship and assumptions about speaker expectations in that the latter characterizes objective circumstances: whether Beth knows the boy they are speaking about or sees him often pertains to objective reality. Just as the factor of assumed ongoing personal relationship, the epistemic factor was very common among NS responses yet did not occur to NNS respondents. For the NSs, both of the above factors were often at work in their assessments of tense uses, for example:

ID 17: "*If I **expected to see the shop assistant** again, or if I **knew the shop assistant**, I would say 'he or she has'; but if **it was just someone I saw**, I would say 'That person had blue eyes', I wouldn't say 'That person has blue eyes.'*"

However, as noted above, neither of these two factors seemed to occur to the NNSs. Only one NNS respondent mentioned that, judging from the mention of "*that really cute assistant*", the boy in question could be someone they knew who existed in their knowledge background. There was a very strong tendency among NNSs to use the present tense. The objective factor of whether a state could be inferred to be permanent or liable to change was clearly the principal, if not the only, concern for many NNS respondents. The typical reasons given are shown as follows:

ID 26: "*As for eyes, the boy who had blue eyes at the shop will still have blue eyes when the conversation took place. So present tense is my preference.*"

ID 42: "*Because the eye colour is something that doesn't change*"

ID 25: "*Just describe the boy's characteristics. Describing a long-lasting property of someone*"

ID 36: "*What the speaker wants to stress is the person's state rather than tense or time. The colour of his eyes was and is blue, which does not change with time.*"

ID 35: "*The speaker is concerned with the eye colour as an objective fact and a general situation, rather than a particular time in the past.*"

ID 23: "*People's eye colour won't change. It is an objective fact.*"

Four NNS respondents chose the past tense. One example of their justifications is that "*The context of the event is all in the past.*" (ID 42)



Two NNS respondents thought both the present and past tense were acceptable. One example of their justifications is shown as follows:

ID 24: *“Past tense seems to emphasize what they saw at a particular time in the past, whereas present tense suggests an attribute of the person which they regard as true at the moment of the speech event.”*

Although this NNS respondent pointed out the semantic distinction between the present tense and the past tense, it is clear that her distinction, unlike NS responses, was based on temporal factors only. She did not provide any further pragmatic information about why the speaker wants to talk about a particular time in the past or alternatively an attribute of the person.

Note that in connection with prompt #1.3, there was a remarkable difference between NSs and NNSs with respect to their use of the present tense (see below). None of the NS respondents chose the present tense whereas 16 out of 22 NNS respondents did so.

Prompt No.	Tense choice	NS (N=22)	NNS (N=22)
#1.3	PAST	17	4
	PRES	0	16
	BOTH	5	2

Furthermore, the five NS respondents who chose BOTH used “if” prefaced conditionals to differentiate the specific situations where they deemed either present tense or past tense should be appropriate. One type of situation corresponds to objective situations in real life, i.e., whether the boy is active in the speaker’s current life. Another type of situation corresponds to subjective intention regarding the future, i.e., whether the speaker expects to meet the boy again. These possibilities are evident in another prompt related to past time memory, #1.16.

#1.16
Ann: Do you remember that Danish family we met in Majorca last summer?
Bob: You mean Kirsten and Ole? They _____ not Danish; they _____Norwegian.

Significant difference was found between the NSs and NNSs in their choices for prompt #1.16.

Prompt No.	Tense Choice	NS (N=22)	NNS (N=22)
#1.16	PAST	7	2
	PRES	2	18
	BOTH	13	2

As is evident from the following verbal reports, the NS respondents were very specific about the link between tense choice and assumed current/prospective ongoing personal relationship.

ID 2: *“Present would be less likely if it’s someone Bob **has to think hard to remember**; if it’s a couple he’s **in current contact** with, he might use present.”*

ID 9: *“Past tense places the event in the past (**no more recent contact**); present tense infers **recent contact or knowledge of the person.**”*

ID 17: *“I would use past tense if I **wasn’t going to see them again**, and present tense if I **thought I would see them again.**”*

ID 4: *“If I **wasn’t gonna see them again**, I would say they weren’t Danish, or they were not Danish, they were Norwegian; if I **was gonna see them again**, say **I met them and I got their email, I added them on facebook or something like that**, then I would say “They are not Danish, they are Norwegian.”*

ID 20: *“If they were still in contact with them, I guess there it’s present; but since um, **he’s saying ‘do you remember’, that means it’s not people they are constantly seeing.** And therefore, present tense doesn’t seem so appropriate. **So I think, I think it has to be past.**”*

ID 20: *“If like it were some weird circumstances where Bob is **still in contact with them**, or he had **some recent emails from them**, say, **and she hadn’t.** I think he might say ‘They are not Danish, they are Norwegian’, because he, **it’s still a current relationship to him.** But we don’t know that un, un, ..., **I don’t think that’s part of the context. So I think it’s past.**”*

ID 14: *“Although both tenses could be used, I would choose past tense as the event was **‘last summer’ definitely in the past** although the subjects would not have changed nationality.”*

By contrast, none of the NNS respondents mentioned personal relationship or contact in their reports. The factors that they considered were change of circumstances and objective reality. The following are some of their reports:

ID 42: “*The statement shouldn’t **change with time**.*”

ID 40: “*Present tense should be used to express nationality.*”

ID 36: “*It feels like the statement is similar to say that the person is **not a man but a woman**. The sentence is used to emphasize the fact. There is no point in emphasizing past or present.*”

ID 33: “*It is to describe **objective fact**, so present tense should be used.*”

ID 35: “*Past tense would be appropriate if the people being talked about **are dead already**.*”

ID 32: “*If they are **still alive**, present tense; if they **are dead**, past tense.*”

ID 28: “*Use simple present to **express the fact** that they are Norwegian not Danish*”

ID 26: “***Ethnicity** does not **change**.*”

ID 25: “*Nationality is not a **long-lasting property**.*”

Another feature noticeable in NS justification was that NS respondents frequently associated the connotation of past tense with a cluster of expressions which indicate completion, such as “gone”, “finished”, “history”, “part of the history”, “out of the picture”, “no longer in the scene”, “closed case”, “done”, “over with it”, “in the past”. This is evident in prompts #2.3-#2.4 and #2.5-#2.6.

#2.3-#2.4	#2.5-#2.6
Mother: Your Sherri's late.	Mother: Your Sherri's late.
Son: Mum...Sherri and I broke up.	Son: Mum...Sherri and I broke up.
Mother: Not Sherri? I <u>liked</u> Sherri. I <u>didn't</u> like the other girls you brought home.	Mother: Not Sherri? I <u>like</u> Sherri. I <u>don't</u> like the other girls you brought home.

In #2.3-#2.4, the NS respondents showed a consistently higher acceptance for the past tense than NNS respondents. As we can see from the table below, 16 NS respondents rated 5 (very natural) for the past tense in # 2.3 whereas 11 NNS respondents rated -1 (completely unacceptable). Similarly, 17 NS respondents rated 5 for the past tense in #2.4 whereas seven NNS respondents

rated -1. Conversely, the results for prompts #2.5-#2.6 show clearly that the NNS respondents showed a unanimously high acceptance for the present tense.

Prompts	Groups	Scale values							Total
		-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	
#2.3*	NS(N=22)	3	0	1	0	0	2	16	22
	NNS(N=22)	11	3	4	2	1	0	1	22
#2.4*	NS(N=22)	1	0	0	0	0	4	17	22
	NNS(N=22)	7	3	5	3	2	0	2	22
#2.5*	NS(N=22)	0	0	1	5	7	3	6	22
	NNS(N=22)	0	1	0	0	0	1	20	22
#2.6*	NS(N=22)	6	0	4	2	4	1	5	22
	NNS(N=22)	0	2	0	0	0	1	19	22

Again, most of reasons given by NS respondents in their justification for the choice of past tense were related to the assumed existence of a relationship, as shown below:

ID 2: “*Most likely to use past tense for **past girlfriends**.*”

ID 8: “*Past tense suggests acceptance of the fact that **these relationships** were in the past – so **mother no longer feels she needs to make judgements re. these people**.*”

ID 9: “*If you are trying to **impose distance (i.e., emotive/ judgemental)** you would use past tense.*”

ID 15: “*As **contact with Sherri is now in the past and over with**, past tense seems appropriate*”

ID 17: “*Because he has **broken up with her** and **the mother is not likely to see her again**, past tense is probably just a little better, but both are ok.*”

ID 22: “*The reality is probably that is **the end of the relationship with Sherri** anyway, so you will **never see the girl again because the boy won’t bring her home**. So, so that’s why the past tense is appropriate (laughing). **That’s the end of that. She’s no longer in the scene. No, she’s history. Go on.***”

We can see from the above responses that the NNS respondents constantly linked the use of past tense with the factors that (a) end of relationship between the son and Sherri and (b) the mother is not going to see Sherri again. One NS respondent added that it is possible to use the present tense in a particular context, that is, if the mother knows Sherri and sees her regularly even if her son broke up with her.

ID 8: *“Present tense suggests **an ongoing relationship on behalf of the mother towards the people concerned**. It feels a bit strange but I guess if these are people **whom the mother sees regularly** it could be ok. **If it is a small town, she knows all the kids involved**, ‘Oh, actually I like HER. I don’t like the others’, right? Um, ‘cause **I know them**, you know. That’s my, um, that’s what I think it is. If I say ‘I liked her, I liked them’ **when I saw them**, it sort of suggests that again, er, **from the mother’s point of view, there is no expectation to see the person again**. Or, you know, you are talking about I, **I met him, at the time I liked him**; maybe if I see him again, I might like him. **That’s expression of something that’s finished. I liked them at the time. I don’t expect to see them again. It’s sort of like the, the expectation.** I think that’s the feeling I pick up when I hear somebody says that.”*

We now examine the other subtype of the non-completive past tense: past contextual frame.

#1.1 The animal you saw \_\_\_\_\_ a possum; see, there he is running up a tree.

#1.2 The animal you saw \_\_\_\_\_ a possum; this picture in the guidebook proves it.

Section 5.2 has shown that there was a significant difference between the NSs and NNSs in tense choice for prompt #1.1. The NSs preferred past tense whereas the NNSs preferred present tense: in the NS group, 12 chose past tense and two the present tense; in the NNS group, 14 chose present tense and three the past tense (see below).

Prompts No.	Tense choice	NS (N=22) Frequency	NNS (N=22) Frequency
#1.1 *	PAST	12	3
	PRES	2	14
	BOTH	8	5
#1.2	PAST	17	12
	PRES	1	5
	BOTH	4	5

We can see from the following responses that the NS respondents frequently linked their justification of the past tense to the preceding verb “saw”.

ID 10: *“The chosen tense follows the past tense ‘saw’.”*

ID 12: *“Past tense because ‘saw’ was used. I would use ‘is’ if the animal was sitting still and I was asked ‘what animal is that?’”*

ID 14: *“I would say past tense because you saw the animal in the past.”*

ID 20: *“No significant difference but given the past tense in the first verb ‘saw’, it sounds more comfortable to say ‘was’.”*

ID 21: *“This verb ‘saw’, you know, the action, sort of governs, determines, the tense. If anything, I would, I would tend to say ‘was’, but I think ‘is’ is OK as well.”*

One NS respondent (ID 20) mentioned that the second part of the sentence made no difference in her choice. She also gave the following response when asked what feeling the present tense (i.e., #1.2) brought to her.

*I: What kind of feeling do you get if somebody said “is”? Does the speaker want to stress something?*

A: *Um, that would suggest to me that the person, **the speaker is, uh, knows more about, like possibly they are Australians. The other person isn't. And they're explaining something about local flora and fauna. And this sort of adopting a teacher kind of authoritative role. So the past tense is more about the action, you know, "the animal you saw was a possum". It's no big deal. But, um, "it is a possum", you know, like you are starting to explaining, giving whole lot of detail or something. I think they are subtle. I'm reading a lot into it. The second part of the sentence doesn't make me want to choose present tense. That's irrelevant to me. Irrelevant.***

The following responses show how the NNS informants justified the present tense choice in #1.1. The second part of the sentence affected tense choice for some NNS informants.

ID 23: *"The sentence is describing **a general phenomenon.**"*

ID 35: *"**Describing the current situation: the possum is in front of you running up the tree.** No reason to use the past tense. Also the name of the animal is an objective fact."*

ID 26: *"This is a typical conversation (the addressee 'you') and **as things are happening**, the use of present tense is natural."*

ID 32: *"**Judged by the second part of the sentence**, the speaker is making assertion on the basis of the situation when he speaks, i.e., the animal is still in the scene. I may use 'must be' or 'was' if the second sentence weren't there."*

Some NNS respondents thought BOTH tenses were acceptable for #1.1.

ID 28: *"'was' is consistent with the preceding verb 'saw'. Past tense refers to what was seen then was a possum. 'Is' should be OK as well because this type of animal is always possum. Also the present tense is consistent with the following sentence. "*

ID 33: *"'was' highlights the time in the past; 'is' could be objective description of the animal."*

Some NNS respondents chose NOT SURE for #1.1.

ID 29: *"Actually, I'm not very sure. I guess both tenses are acceptable"*

In prompt #1.2, there was a considerable increase for both NSs and NNSs with respect to the use of the past tense. The justifications given by both groups were similar. The NS responses are shown as follows:

ID 2: *"Sounds like they're looking in the book later, after having seen the animal."*

ID 12: “The event **has been concluded**, you are **no longer** looking at the possum.”

ID 8: “Same as # 1.1. Past tense is best **because the tenses match**. That is what you saw then. It was a possum. However if you use present tense, **the stress is ‘this is what that animal is called’** – it is a possum.”

ID 20: “If anything, ‘is’ presents itself **slightly marked, slightly less natural**. Slightly.”

ID 5: “**It’s just unnatural**. Why, why would you say ‘is’ a possum? ‘The animal you saw was a possum’, you know? I mean it ‘was’ a possum.”

ID 17: “You have to see it, to look at it, to say ‘is’.”

ID 9: “Even though the 2nd sentence is in present tense I would never use present tense.”

Similarly, many NNS responses stressed what happened in the past.

ID 40: “It is looking back at things that happened in the past. It’d better to use past tense.”

ID 36: “The emphasis is what the speaker saw the other day, what happened in the past.”

Still some NNS respondents preferred the present tense in #1.2.

ID 27: “The second part of the sentence shows that **the creature you saw should be called a possum**.”

ID 33: “It seems here **the whole context stresses the aspect of objective denotation**.”

To sum up, there were quantitative and qualitative differences between the two groups regarding the use of non-completive past tense. In acceptability judgement tasks, the NNS informants tended to prefer the present tense whereas the NS informants preferred the past tense. The introspective reports given by the NSs and NNSs revealed qualitative differences indicating perceptions of various factors in making their judgements respectively. With respect to the subtype of past memory, the important factor taken into account by the NSs features the speaker’s assumed personal relationship with the person under discussion, which involves pragmatic and/or epistemic considerations. By contrast, the factor taken into account by the NNSs features change of circumstances. With respect to the subtype of past contextual frame, the factor of co-text seemed to play a more important role for the NNS informants than their NS counterparts despite the fact that both groups of speakers reported awareness to tense consistency.



### 5.4.2 A dual perspective

Prompts #1.9, #1.13, #1.14, #1.18 were classified as samples open to alternative perspectives. Statistically significant differences were found between the NS and NNS groups for #1.14 and #1.18, but not for #1.9 and #1.13.

#1.9 Shakespeare_____ a renowned playwright.
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The quantitative results for the NS and NNS groups are shown below.

Prompt No.	Tense Choice	NS(N=22)	NNS(N=22)
#1.9	PAST	2	3
	PRES	9	12
	BOTH	11	6
	NOT SURE	0	1

With respect to #1.9, we can see the NS responses were quite divided. Nine of them chose present tense, two past tense and 11 BOTH. Some choosing BOTH pointed out that past tense would be more natural or preferred over present tense. And it is easy for them to think of a context to use past tense.

ID 2: *“Present tense could be possible only in rare contexts, e.g., if you were discussing lots of different writers from different eras.”*

ID 20: *“If someone, if the name came up and people indicated they didn’t know who he was, I’d say: ‘Shakespeare was a renowned playwright’, past tense. um, **when would I use present tense?** ...um, **I don’t know**, you might even have to **work on it harder to come up with a context to use present tense there**. I might have just sort of, **add something there about English literature, and say um, let’s talk about great writers, for example, Shakespeare is a renowned English playwright. And I don’t know, how do you describe the difference between those two?** Present tense not emphasizing that he’s dead and gone. As I say, you would have to come up with a series of names of famous playwrights, or as you say, we emphasize the fact that the person’s reputation lives on today. Past tense, you know, **you could imagine a whole series of facts about him**. He was born in 1564, Um, yeah, sort of*

**biographical facts.** Clearly there, there is some importance to indicate when he was born and that was in the past, and you can actually mention a time marker and so that's gonna determine it."

Some NSs (e.g., ID 17) chose past tense for the reason that Shakespeare was dead so he won't be making any more plays: "*Because he is never gonna write another play again. He is **not currently** a renowned playwright who is writing plays. So, he 'was'.*" When asked whether they could reckon any situation where other native speakers would use present tense, NS respondents pointed out present tense could be used if the speaker is talking about Shakespeare's work not Shakespeare as a person.

ID 17: "*Maybe say 'Shakespeare is amazing'. Shakespeare, **when they are not talking about not, not necessarily Shakespeare, his actual name, but his work.** Then they might say Shakespeare is amazing. **Because here we are talking about this person, and the person is dead. So we can't use "is" to describe him. But if I'm referring to his work, then 'is' is acceptable, or appropriate.***"

Twelve NNS informants chose the present tense for the following reasons:

ID 33: "*Objective description*"

ID 32: "*Current commentary. If there is specific time reference indicating something in the past then past tense should be used.*"

ID 40: "*It seems that present tense should be used to show respect for him*"

Six NNS respondents justified their choice for BOTH as follows:

ID 38: "*Depending on the viewpoint of the speaker*"

ID 36: "*'Is' indicates that this is a fact regardless of time, be it past or now. He has always been respected. Tense is not an issue here. 'Was' can also be used because Shakespeare passed away already. Things related to him perhaps should be in the past tense, emphasizing that he was famous in that era.*"

ID 35: "*Generally speaking, past tense should be used to talk about dead people. But to describe great people who have been influential till now, it is OK to use present tense. Actually, present tense is more common.*"

ID 26: "*Both acceptable but **I would use present tense***"

#1.13 [The speaker, who is at a flea market, is trying to explain why she bought the second-hand item she is holding.] It \_\_\_\_\_ have any stains on it.

Although there was no statistically significant difference between the choices made by NSs and NNSs, NNSs still displayed a noticeable preference for the present tense than NSs. Eighteen NNSs chose the present tense in contrast to 11 NSs. Only one NNS respondent chose the past tense compared to five NSs. Further examination of the responses shows that NSs and NNSs chose present tense for different reasons.

Prompt No.	Tense Choice	NS	NNS
#1.13	PAST	5	1
	PRES	11	18
	BOTH	6	3

Many NS speakers pointed out that they chose the present tense *“because she’s holding the item while speaking”* or *“She is holding it now”*.

ID 8: *“Present tense seems preferable **because you are describing a situation that is still continuing at the time of talking, an object that you are holding and showing at the time of talking. If there is a suggestion that since then it has acquired a stain – at the time it did not, so “I” chose it – or if you are trying to stress the situation at the time of the choice, then you can use ‘was’**”*

ID 9: *“Depending on context. Said on its own, present tense is the justification for the purchased item. Said in defence of the purchased item it is past tense because at the time ‘it didn’t have stains’”*

Some NS respondents chose the past tense to emphasize the reason for past time purchase.

ID 10: *“She is referring to the garment whilst she was in the act of considering whether to buy it or not.” “She has already bought the item, and **is explaining that when she took the decision it was because it did not have any stains on it.** The tense chosen follows the action, and the time of the action.”*

NNSs, on the other hand, paid more attention to change of circumstances or change in the speaker's knowledge. For example,

ID 26: *"Present tense because the condition of 'having no stains' **has not changed over time.**"*

ID 27: *"Past tense: **It didn't have any stains on it then but now it has.**"*

ID 33: *"Past tense implies 'it has stains now', she may return the item then."*

ID 24: *"Past tense is possible when, for example, the speaker didn't see the stains when she checked it before buying it (**and she is aware they are there now**)."*

Many NNS respondents chose the present tense because they took the sentence as a description of the state of the item, for instance, *"The speaker emphasizes the state of the item which applies to the past, the present and even the future."* Only one NNS respondent mentioned *"She is describing a thing she is holding"*, therefore present tense.

The only NNS respondent who chose past tense justified that *"The speaker is explaining what the item was like at that time instead of what it is like now"*, which is similar to the NS justification.

#1.14* I'm sorry we left Chester. It _____ such a nice place.
---

With respect to #1.14, 16 NS respondents chose BOTH whereas 11 NNSs preferred the present tense. See below for their tense choices.

Prompts No.	Tense choice	NS	NNS
#1.14*	PAST	3	6
	PRES	3	11
	BOTH	16	5

The NS informants often associated with the past tense with past experience.

ID 6: *"Depends on the tone of voice and meaning; 'was' as though you are **talking about your experience**; 'is' if you are **merely commenting on the town per se.**"*

ID 8: “Present tense is saying that **Chester is still a nice place now**. Past tense is **stressing the pleasant experience you had at the time**. However **if you use past tense you are open to the interpretation that Chester was a nice place but is not anymore**.”

Among NSs who chose BOTH, many preferred past tense over the present tense.

ID 2: “Both acceptable **but past tense is more likely** because of the previous sentence.”

ID 9: “**PAST in general, and PRES sometime**. Past tense is referring to Chester being a nice place and implies **when I was there**. It also suggests **current emotional attachment**. Present tense **refers to ‘now’**– it is still nice, even though I am not there.”

One NS respondent mentioned the factor of whether he was going to go back to Chester or not.

ID 17: “I would use present tense if I was **planning on returning** and past tense if I was not planning on returning. But either is ok. **When I say ‘is’, I mean like I would probably go back there again**. Say if I’m doing a trip around China, and I go through, umm, I start at Hong Kong and I get to Shanghai and Beijing, **I would say Shanghai was really nice, because when I was there, it was nice**. But if I, if I, probably I’m gonna go back there, like, say from going HK, Shanghai, Beijing, then back to Shanghai, **I will say ‘Shanghai is really nice’. ‘It is really nice.’**”

NNS respondents preferred the present tense for varied reasons. One reason is that past tense indicates change of state. See below:

ID 33: “Past tense implies Chester is not a nice place now.”

ID 36: “I prefer the present tense although both are acceptable. To me, the sentence is meant to indicate that Chester is a nice place indeed. The speaker does not mean that Chester was a nice place but it isn’t now. Past tense is also acceptable because the speaker may not know what Chester is like now.”

ID 35: “Present tense indicates evaluation of objective things. Present tense also indicates the pleasant feeling of the speaker still exists now.”

ID 36: “**Present tense indicates a more favourable impression towards Chester than the past tense**. Past tense implies the favourable impression is not so intense whereas the present tense emphasizes the place is always nice.”

ID 35: “Past tense is used to express the feeling that the speaker ever had in the past.”

Some NNS respondents chose BOTH without stating a preference.

ID 26: *“The place they once lived or just a general comment.”*

ID 28: *“Present tense indicates a nice feeling towards Chester. Past tense is OK as it is consistent with the preceding past tense. The speaker felt good when he or she was in Chester. A feeling in the past.”*

ID 24: *“Past tense means Chester being a nice place is true when the speaker lived there. Present tense suggests it’s true with reference to the time of utterance.”*

ID 39: *“The place they once lived, hence past tense or just a general comment, hence present tense.”*

Some NNS respondents preferred past tense for the following reasons:

ID 25: *“They already have left there.”*

ID 32: *“The speaker is making comment upon the time when they lived there.”*

ID 40: *“The sentence conveys the speaker’s impression about the place. The speaker is recalling the past as they have left the place. Therefore past tense is appropriate.”*

Among those NNSs who chose past tense, one respondent (ID 26) explicitly mentioned past experience: *“My preference is ‘was’ to be consistent with the context indicating **past experience**.”*

#1.18\* “I’m sorry,” she said, “but I told Mr. Martin yesterday that we \_\_\_\_\_ not thinking of selling.”

With respect to #1.18, 13 NS respondents chose BOTH in contrast to three NNSs. And 14 NNSs chose the past tense as opposed to five NSs.

Prompt No.	Tense Choice	NS	NNS
#1.18	PAST	5	14
	PRES	4	5
	BOTH	13	3

Many NS respondents thought that the choice was highly context dependent.

ID 12: *“Depends on context. What is the question that comes before this statement?”*

ID 9: *“Very much context dependent. If someone is accentuating the prior statement (not for sale), then PAST; if someone is impressing that they are not interested in selling (i.e., restating), then PRES.”*

ID 20: *“This one I had more trouble with. I think you could, I think both are acceptable. You probably need to know more about the context you’d be sort of emphasizing, maybe there’s some discussion between them about what the decision is or something like that.”*

ID 8: *“If you stress the situation at the time you spoke with Mr. Martin you would use ‘were’. Since then you may have changed your mind. However, if you want to stress the fact that you are still not thinking of selling then you might use ‘are’.”*

ID 19: *“They’re both fine, I guess. I think ‘were’ suggests that they may think about selling today.”*

Some NS respondents preferred the past tense for the following reasons.

ID 2: *“Past tense is normal for reported speech.”*

ID 10: *“It has to be related to the foregoing past tense.”*

ID 20: *“This ‘I told’ makes me naturally choose past.”*

Some NS respondents preferred the present tense as in their view, the speaker wants to express her current thoughts and there is an emphatic effect about her determination of not selling by using present tense.

ID 14: *“At present we are not thinking of selling. And the event was only yesterday. It’s probably the same today.”*

ID 17: *“Because she still feels the same today, so it’s still present tense, maybe if it was last year I would use past tense. Maybe if I were talking about last year, then I would use ‘were’. The reason is yesterday. If I was thinking about yesterday, probably I am thinking about selling today. So my opinion probably hasn’t changed from yesterday till today, but over a year I would probably use ‘were’. Last year we were thinking about selling our car.”*

ID 20: *“‘are’ emphasises that this is their current position, but perhaps it was different before, or may change in the future. She’s emphasizing what their position is.”*

ID 12: *“Because like, say the husband or the other person says I’ve invited Mr. Martin around to have a look at the house. And she says ‘I’m sorry, but I told Mr. Martin yesterday we are not thinking of selling’, so she’s kind of contradicting him or as a conflict between them.”*

Some NS respondents expressed uncertainty.

ID 10: "**A tricky one!** It could be 'were' because she saw Mr. Martin yesterday, but she is also speaking today, in the present, and for the future, so present tense is more correct."

ID 11: "My instinct says PAST because the conversation took place in the past, **but I'm not certain.**"

The choices of many NNS respondents were constrained by "told".

ID 33: "The tense choice should be consistent with the preceding verb 'told'"

ID 35: "As the main clause is in the past tense, the subordinate tense should maintain the same."

ID 42: "Because that's what she told Martin."

Some NNS respondents preferred the present tense.

ID 40: "I feel that the present tense is better, indicating the attitude does not change now."

ID 28: "Although the speaker told Mr. Martin yesterday, the present tense indicates that they do not intend to sell the house. Therefore present tense is appropriate."

Some NNS respondents chose BOTH.

ID 24: "Past tense emphasizes what she said yesterday while present tense indicates their present intention."

ID 36: "The use of the present tense shows what they think; just stating a fact which has not changed. The use of the past tense stresses the idea that was communicated yesterday, which might be different from now."

The NS and NNS participants exhibited considerable differences in their selection and interpretation of tenses with regard to prompts subject to a dual perspective. The NS informants produced far more BOTH than the NNSs. The NSs who chose BOTH often indicated their preference for one tense or the other with adequate justifications. For example, the past tense was associated with past experience and the present tense was linked to the speaker's now and here. The NSs were also able to associate different contexts with tense uses. The NNSs who chose BOTH, however, often failed to state a preference. In such cases, it seemed that the reason for them to choose BOTH was due to indecisiveness or confusion. When the NNSs did have a preference, they often preferred the present tense over the past unless there was a clear past time reference in the co-text. In the NNSs' reports, there was a close link between past tense and change of state, which was not necessary for the NSs. In sum, the speakers of the two groups justified the same tense choice based on different criteria.



### 5.4.3 Tense usage in citing other's work

Samples of tense usage in academic citations include prompts #2.7 and #2.8 as well as #4.2 (the second question in Part VI).

#2.7 Smith (1980) <u>argued</u> that Britain is no longer a country in which freedom of speech is seriously maintained.	# 2.8 Smith (1980) <u>argues</u> that Britain is no longer a country in which freedom of speech is seriously maintained.
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With respect to prompts #2.7 and #2.8, no statistically significant differences were found between NSs and NNSs in their acceptability ratings. In the NS group, the mean rating for #2.8 (the present tense) was slightly higher than that of #2.7 (the past tense). In the NNS group, the mean ratings were very similar for the two tenses (see below).

Prompt No.	NS (N=22)	NNS(N=22)
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
#2.7	3.91(1.925)	3.36(2.150)
#2.8	4.23(1.270)	3.32(1.887)

The NS respondents provided a number of factors which they believed affect or determine tense choice in citing other's work, including education and change of state.

ID 8: *“Present tense is just the way I have been taught to write references – to use present tense. Otherwise you might be emphasising that the author has since changed his mind. Even then, I think that the accepted form would be present simple. It emphasises the fact that each article, once published, is an entity in its own right and does not change.”*

ID 12: *“Past tense is only used if the situation has changed since 1980. After this statement you need to go on to illustrate how he supported this argument and then how this idea has changed. Present tense means the idea or argument is still current.”*

ID 14: *“Smith made this statement in 1980, apparently in a debate, end of story. Smith made this statement in 1980 in what appears to be an on-going argument or debate still continuing.”*

One NS respondent mentioned the factor regarding the time when the information was coded and decoded:

ID 22: *“Equally acceptable. He argued this in the past, but we are reading about it in the present.”*

Some NS respondents thought the choice of tense can be related to different purposes in writing. One of them pointed out that the present tense is closer to the author’s central ideas.

ID 20: *“I think that they could be both in the literature review. I think both are acceptable, both are natural. But the present tense is close to getting to the literature stuff **which is really close to your own interest**. The past tense is **more setting the scene, historical stuff**, so you know, ‘Smith said this, and Brown said that, and Jackson said the other’. And I think maybe you might use present tense if **it sums up the point, a closer point to where you are getting into your central, central ideas**.”*

While some NS respondents stated that the use of present tense is more relevant to the writer’s argument as shown above, others mentioned the factor of the writer’s agreement with the quotation, which in turn is linked to the factor of change of state.

ID 13: *“If using the present tense, I would say the writer is using Smith’s argument **to support something else, so agreeing with it and saying that it is still valid**. The past tense implies that the writer who’s quoting Smith seems to think that the argument that Smith made has been superseded by something else.”*

The NNS respondents offered various perceptions of the factors affecting tense choice in academic citations. For example, past tense was preferred due to the specific past time reference 1980:

ID 34: *“Past tense should be used in academic writing given definite time reference.”*

ID 36: *“The action of Smith’s arguing took place in 1980, hence past tense should be used.”*

Some NNSs stuck to the principle of tense consistency:

ID 32: *“The present tense is more natural than the past tense as it is consistent with the tense in subordinate clause.”*

Some NNSs mentioned the relevance of context in which the citation appears:

ID 33: *“**In literature review**, the past tense seems more preferred than the present tense.”*

ID 30: “Both acceptable. The past tense is more common **when recounting the historical development of some specific research**. The present tense is often used **when providing complementary or contrasting information of relevant arguments**.”

Some NNSs pointed out that the present and past tense convey different emphases:

ID 35: “Past tense in #2.7 is completely acceptable if it was 1980. #2.8 is the historical present, which is also completely acceptable and not uncommon in academic writing. It seems that the past tense **emphasizes the action of arguing which happened in the past** whereas **the latter emphasizes Smith’s viewpoint which can be regarded as objective existence with current value for reference**.”

ID 24: “The past tense **emphasizes the action** while the present tense stresses **the content of the argument**.”

In #4.2, we investigated the perceptions of NSs and NNSs regarding the main factors in selecting tenses in academic citations, which include (A) time of publication (B) Relevance (C) Agreement (D) other factors. The quantitative findings are shown below:

**Table 5.19 Frequency summary for prompt #4.2**

Groups	A (Time of publication )	B (Relevance)	C (Agreement)	D (Other)
NS (N=22)	11	7	7	11
NNS (N=22)	8	4	7	9

As we can see, no obvious differences were found between the two groups in terms of frequency. But it seems there were differences in the other factors specified by the NS group and the NNS group. Among other things, the NS respondents mentioned consistency, writing convention, sequence of ideas and whether the author is dead or not.

ID 4: “People who don't know about academic English would probably go for ‘-ed’”

ID 7: “**The overarching style and consistency should determine tense**.”

ID 22: “I would **choose the tense that matches the rest of the sentence**, e.g., he claims that all human beings are equal or he claimed that the earth was flat.”

ID 21: *“As a rule, I use present tense, unless stating a previous view held by the author that has subsequently changed, e.g., Chomsky(1957) claimed that Universal Grammar... In (1980) he argued...,”*

ID 12: *“Choice of verb suggests agreement or disagreement with a point of view. However academic writing should be in the past tense, unless the argument is ongoing.”*

ID 8: *“It is a convention I have been taught. You use present simple in academic citations. You are referring to an extant reference, and what it says. You can still say something like “in 1957 Noam Chomsky wrote an article in which .....” if you want to stress that his opinions have changed, or you wish to write a narrative, but that is not the convention for citations”*

ID 20: *“I think I use present tense the whole way through my literature review. In the area that I’m doing, stuff, the research is about 20 years old. So, they are all living people and all that, so probably play some part, yeah. Um, I, I think probably time of publication, if it was a long way back, the earliest thing I’m citing is something probably like 1990, something very, very recent. So, somehow it seems more natural. But here, I guess, you know to me the past tense would be appropriate if I report they refuted what Chomsky said or somebody added to what Chomsky said, so, I don’t know, that’s something else, isn’t it? I don’t know what you would call it. So it’s sort of what other, what else is in the context, what’s coming next.”*

ID 10: *“Where an author is dead at the time I am writing, I prefer to use the past tense, though use of the present tense is sometimes permissible. But I prefer the past tense for the reason given!”*

ID 2: *“Personally I just choose a tense + stick with it throughout an essay.”*

ID 15: *“Mostly, I consider the time of publication, but I also think that writers need to make a choice about the tense for particular sections of a paper (literature review, methodology, results) and then be consistent. It is my understanding that it’s acceptable to switch tenses when starting a new section, but not within a section. I know that some authors use relevance and agreement, but switching of tenses for emphasis is confusing in my opinion.”*

ID 20: *“The place that the citation fits in the argument I am constructing may also play a part. If this is a major part of my argument, I may choose the present tense to emphasise my agreement with the writer and the currency and relevance of his/her ideas today. I think I use present tense the whole way through my literature review.”*

ID 14: *“Time of publication would be correct if that was a statement, and the end of the matter. Relevance and agreement would apply if the matter was still being talked about and discussed at present.”*

ID 17: *"Because situations change over time, so answers can too. That's why I think **time of publication** is most important when selecting tense."*

ID 20: *"Let me have a look at what I was doing last week, um, um, Swan model of communicative competence, so in 1980, they proposed that, and then Bachmann came up with a subsequent, sort of, addition of it, modification, **I will definitely use past tense for that. Because you are sort of emphasizing it's important to say this one came up first and the other guy added to it, to show the sequence, yeah, that's about the sequence.** Absolutely right. It's where, where **the sequence of those ideas, publication of those ideas is important**, it's significant."*

Some NNS respondents expressed confusion over tense usage in academic citations.

ID 40: *"**I was very confused** when I started writing my PhD thesis. I didn't know how to switch tenses. I gradually learnt something based on extensive reading, but it seems there is hardly any rule. All in all, tense in academic citations is very hard for EFL learners. I would use the present tense in Chomsky (1957) claims and past tense in reporting the experiments conducted by others. "*

Some thought the tense choice depends on year of publication and the overwhelming majority to their knowledge is in the past tense. The other factors given by NNS respondents include, among other things, the writer's focus, coherence, writing conventions, and the content of the claim.

ID 31: *"Writing conventions. Isn't it the rule in the trade?"*

ID 2: *"**Coherence** with tenses used in other citations in the text."*

ID 29: *"I think both tenses are acceptable in this sentence. **Chomsky is still alive**, isn't he?"*

ID 30: *"**The importance of the citation** considered by the writer. That is, if the writer pays much attention to **the significance/influence the citation exerts**, he/she may choose to **use the present tense.**"*

ID 32: *"Past tense should be used when reviewing what others did; present tense should be used when introducing information relevant to one's own research."*

ID 34: *"If the claim made by Chomsky is a generally acknowledged truth, then present tense should be used; if the writer only describes a viewpoint in that era, past tense should be used."*

ID 39: *"A general statement or not."*

ID 35: “Firstly, the tense should be consistent with those similar citations in preceding texts. Secondly, in literature review if the foregoing text uses the present tense to deliver my general comments, I would tend to swift to past tense to introduce historical references, e.g., Chomsky (1957) claimed that..., to distinguish my own comments and viewpoints held by previous researchers. Thirdly, I would tend to use the past tense when describing methodology and findings. I would tend to use the present tense when discussing the results. This is due to what I learnt from ‘Academic writing’. Lastly, I tend to use the present tense if I agree with previous researchers and past tense if disagree. This is just a feeling, however, as I seldom write in English and did not really look at what I’ve written.”

While no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups of speakers in terms of acceptability rates, there seemed to be similarities as to the factors reported to influence tense choices and interpretations with respect to academic citations. Both groups of speakers provided a number of factors they perceived to affect tense usage in citing other’s work, including education, change of state, discourse coherence, relevance and agreement. Based on the NS reports, tense choice in academic attributions was part of the conventions acquired through formal instruction. A number of the NNSs expressed their confusion in writing.

#### 5.4.4 Historical present and present/past alternation

Prompts represent the historical present tense and present/past alternation include #2.13 and #2.14 in Part II as well as #3.1- #3.4 in Part III. No significant differences were found between the two groups with respect to each of the four prompts in Part III except for the past tense version (see Section 5.2.3). Significant differences were found between the two groups in #2.13 but not in #2.14 (see Section 5.2.2).

#2.13 In 1837, Dickens <u>completes</u> the Pickwick Papers. They <u>are</u> enthusiastically received by many critics. He <u>moves</u> to York and <u>marries</u> his grand-niece Joan. In 1838, they <u>are</u> divorced again.	#2.14 In 1837, Dickens <u>completed</u> the Pickwick Papers. They <u>were</u> enthusiastically received by many critics. He <u>moved</u> to York and <u>married</u> his grand-niece Joan. In 1838, they <u>were</u> divorced again.
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The mean scores of #2.13 and #2.14 are represented below for both groups. We can see that NSs exhibited a high acceptance rate for #2.13 in general while NNSs respondents displayed markedly low acceptance rate.

Prompts	NS (N=22)	NNS (N=22)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> (2-tailed)
	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )		
#2.13	3.32(1.585)	-.05(1.558)	7.099	<b>.000</b>
#2.14	4.68(1.287)	4.82(.501)	-.463	.646

In a closer examination as shown below, we can see that 15 NNS respondents considered the historical present tense as completely unacceptable whereas only one NS did so. By contrast, seven NS respondents considered #2.13 very natural.

Prompts	Groups	Scale values							Total
		<b>-1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
#2.13*	NS(N=22)	1	0	1	4	6	3	7	22
	NNS(N=22)	15	1	1	2	3	0	0	22
#2.14	NS(N=22)	1	0	0	0	0	1	20	22
	NNS(N=22)	0	0	0	0	1	2	19	22

When asked what kinds of feelings were obtained from the use of the historical present, the NS respondents proved capable of providing a remarkably rich body of opinion. Their responses varied but were frequently associated with expressions such as “documentary”, “spoken/oral”, “bring to life”, “exciting”, “fictional”, “immediacy”, “inside”, “dynamic” “personal” and “emotional”. By contrast, the past tense was associated with “formal”, “serious”, “factual”, “historic”, “objective”, “distanced”, “outside” and “written”. The following shows how the NS informants responded to the use of historical present tense in #2.13:

ID 8: *“It’s a device, a literary device used by people attempting to give a sense of immediacy to a narrative – it sounds like it is happening while the person is talking – like describing a play unfolding as you speak.”*

ID 9: “The present tense is *informative and engaging writing style* which *embraces a contemporary view of storytelling* – there are *multiple truths not facts in talking about lives lived.*”

ID 12: “The present tense is used *to recount a historic timeline of events*”

ID 16: “The whole sound of the present seems to be from *a first person delivery.*”

ID 15: “Just more like the present tense is trying to make it *exciting, and immediate, and personal, something like that.*”

ID 8: “It’s got to do with *the immediacy and the experience of the person listening and speaking to.*”

ID 17: “I think it’s more, um, it’s almost, I guess, *maybe more positive*, sort of like you, you, *it’s like in a biography that person studies that person, you feel, almost like a kinship with them, you feel something*, what’s more, *it’s written in a general sort of way, um, more textbooky, a little bit more, um, personal almost?* So it’s *almost like you see him complete the Pickwick Papers and they are enthusiastically received, somewhere like um... Yeah, showing your emotions, sharing your feeling. You don’t feel anything for the past tense but basic factual..., but the present tense almost sounds like a person feeling behind it.*”

The NS respondents were also able to provide various specific contexts where the historical present tense would be appropriate.

ID 2: “Natural for a *documentary*”

ID 14: “This sounds like *‘newspaper speak’, not used in conversation*, but acceptable in such as a *documentary* commentary.”

ID 17: “You know *documentary* as well, that’s the kind of feel like you can get from reading #2.13. *You know somebody is acting it out. It’s like ‘I will be Dickens’.*”

ID 8: “If you *watch documentaries on television*, um, there are *documentaries where the editors will deliberately use certain tense* when they are talking about something that happened, and this is the way they speak, right? Because they want you, *they want to put you into the situation, and they want to you to feel it as it happens.* So they’re using present tense. *It’s deliberate. If you want the audience to really experience the feel of what’s happening to Dickens, follow what’s happening, if you want people to see the situation, then you will use present, present tense.*”



ID 1: *"The present tense would be acceptable in a Dickens tour as spoken word, where the tour guide is trying to bring Dickens' experience and actions to life."*

ID 17: *"If it were in a history book that I was reading, past tense, it would be. If you're doing a talk, then you could use the present tense. But I think past tense is always more acceptable."*

ID 18: *"If I was telling you a story about Dickens' life, I could say, kind of detached from you, so I would say 'Dickens completes and...'. But if I was writing it, it's written down anything like that, it would be the past tense. Past tense is more factual."*

ID 4: *"Present tense, more fiction, past tense is more factual. In 1837, he did this, he did that, while in the present tense, he's done this, we are going to do that..."*

ID 20: *"There could be a context in which that the present tense is appropriate, I mean, possibly in speech, rather than in writing. I can imagine a lecturer who's talking about Pickwick's papers for example, and he's trying sort of make it all, kind of you know, historical present tense and kind of stuff, and says 'In 1873, Dickens completes Pickwick's papers, they are enthusiastically received by many critics, he moves to York and marries...' he sort of trying to make it all very immediate and exciting for people, that's a VERY specific context. And he's emphasizing sort of you know, the, the events and the sequence between them or the relationship between them or something like that. Here in #2.14 it's more much like, you know, reading what happened in Dickens' life and all past tense because it just happened like that. It's harder to imagine a context using the present tense, but I have, I had heard that sort of thing. And I'm just trying to think of a situation, you said biography, but, there are other contexts either I heard it or I read it. To me, it's quite oral. Um, but no, you are right. It is biography, you know, Rupert Murdoch, you know, he, he leaves Australia, he goes to New York, he puts on a buzz, you know, whatever this great media character ...it's sort of, um... it's also very short, usually very short sort of sentences. Yeah, it's...personal, somehow, it's trying to draw you in, I think why I said a lecturer at first. The lecturer is trying to make these somewhat boring facts come to life. And the present tense somehow makes you see the person as a person, even though the subsequent sentence is more about his book, yeah. Yeah, it's more exciting, yeah. The past tense is all just finished, and dead and done and dusted sort of thing. #2.14 is more factual, objective, impersonal, yeah, narrative, yeah."*

ID 3: *"I don't know what the difference is. I mean there is a difference, but I'm not sure how to explain it. Maybe the past tense is more serious, maybe more formal. The past tense is*

*more distanced. So like a history telling you about what is beyond your life time. More likely to be in a serious history, trying to be more formal. The present tense seems more dynamic. It's more kind of almost putting the readers in that point in time and introducing them to what Dickens ...Present tense is more accessible like children's history or something found in a magazine giving a sketch of his life."*

We can see from above that some NSs thought the present tense is more dynamic whereas the past tense is more distanced. Besides, some NS respondents mentioned that the historical present suggests a series of steps or creates pace.

ID 20: *"But in #2.13 something else is coming, like this is preamble to something coming here, whether there is a change of tense or a big focus, like this is preliminary to a big event. Like all of these present tense verbs, I think something different is gonna come here, there's gonna be a contrast. Yeah, building up to, we're building up the momentum or something, excitement, interest. AND THEN, 'in 1840, he publishes his great work, which is blablabla", and we start to talk about that in a different way. So we're scene-setting, we're scene-setting in a way, whereas here the past tense it is more kind of like chi-chi-chi, everything is equal here, but the present tense, we are leading up to a bigger thing, I think. Could be something more exciting like a huge achievement or his most famous novel. Mhm, it sounds to me like, um, a series of steps, you know, this this this and this this, then, BANG, something, something really big happens in 1840. I think that's definitely how orally people use it, they, they put on a series of these things and you, you're kind of with them. The present tense makes you sort of just looks to the next thing. Something like that, yeah, that's suspenseful. And THEN, and, but they're leading up to the big achievement or the change or the contrast or the destruction or the climax, whatever it is. While the past tense is like, achievement, achievement, achievement, event, event, event, it's kind of much more objective and historic and you are outside it. The present tense, you are sort of inside it, more like you can project yourself into it. Just a theory. Just a hypothesis."*

Some NS respondents thought the historical present tense in #2.13 was grammatically wrong or marked yet permissible in narrative.

ID 10: *"The present tense is grammatically wrong since the actions took place a long time ago, but it is permissible where writers are trying to create pace and immediacy for the reader."*

ID 20: *"I find the present tense very unusual. To describe events so far in the past using the present tense is unusual. The writer may be doing this to achieve some special effect but without more context, this is difficult to judge."*

ID 21: “*The present tense is **acceptable** as a narrative in progress.*”

ID 18: “***Acceptable** narrative style.*”

Some NS informants could provide more examples related to the use of the historical present tense beyond the prompts in question:

ID 8: “***I guess if you work with kids long enough you get quite used to it. You know children will often, when speaking to each other, tell me about what happened, this is what they do, they use present simple, you know, and say: oh you know, you know, that boy came up to me last night, you know, he comes up and says this and this, and I said to him, get off and I’m tired and this and this. They use present simple all the time, because, you know, they feel the emotions, you know emotional expressions are important when young people, esp. when they are speaking to each other. Um, it’s not necessarily I think bad English.***”

Note that the responses given by the NS respondents did not necessarily agree with each other. Instead sometimes they presented contradictory remarks. For example, while most responses indicated that the historical present tense is often used in speech, some commented that “*The present tense could be used **to make a piece of writing engaging, but would not be expressed in this way verbally.***” (ID 22) Even the same respondent offered seemingly contrasting views upon the effect of the historical present. For example, one respondent (ID 17) used “*detached*”, “*general*”, “*textbooky*” and “*personal*” to describe her feelings towards #2.13.

The comments regarding #2.14 were highly consistent among the NS respondents:

ID 2: “*Also natural + the more obvious choice*”

ID 6: “*This is **historical look at the past, the one students have no memories.***”

ID 8: “*#2.14 is more of **a historical description of past events in the order that they occurred.***”

ID 9: “*The second is **formal and is stated as though what is reported is a factual account.***”

ID 12: “***Simple recounting of events***”

ID 14: “*This would be **normal way of setting out the events of the author's life.***”

ID 21: “***More realistic as a narrative in the past tense.***”

In contrast with the richness of NS responses, NNS informants’ understanding of the use of the present tense in these contexts was rather limited, as evidenced by the dogmatic character of the

opinions offered. The typical view was that past tense should be used to describe things that happened in the past, therefore they marked #2.13 as completely unacceptable.

ID 23: “*Particularly, **given the specific past time reference** in the passage past tense should be used.*”

ID 36: “*It is inconceivable to imagine a context where the historical present tense would be appropriate.*”

ID 35: “*For me, #2.13 is **ungrammatical**. Although in informal English it is possible for someone to use the historical present creatively to achieve some rhetorical effect or vividness, in formal English past tense should be used. Here I think past tense should be used considering due to the presence of definite past time adverbials as well as the passage’s focus on Dickens’ life experience rather than his works or ideas.*”

Some NNS respondents recognized the use of the historical present in storytelling, yet specified that it was not natural to use it with past time reference.

Other NNS respondents who thought the historical present as natural to different extents gave the following explanations:

ID 33: “*Different tenses can be used in different genres.*”

ID 24: “*Sounds like a retelling of a film.*”

With respect to prompts #3.1-#3.4, quantitative findings (see Section 5.2.3) show that there was statistically significant difference between the two groups for the past tense version only. Table 5.13 is represented below for readers’ convenience. Post hoc analyses (see Tables 5.16 and 5.17) indicate that for the NS group, both the past tense (#3.1) and present tense (#3.2) version of the same joke were equally natural to certain degree. But for the NNS group, the past tense version (#3.1) was significantly more natural than the present tense version (#3.2). Besides, the versions containing tense alternation in both directions (#3.3 & #3.4) were significantly less natural than the other two versions which did not contain tense alternation (#3.1 & #3.2) in both groups. However, no significant differences were found between #3.3 (switching from present to past) and #3.4 (switching from past to present) in either group. We can see in both groups the mean scores for #3.3 were higher than those for #3.4, suggesting a relatively lower acceptability rate for the former than the latter despite no statistical significance.

**Table 5.13 T-test results for NS and NNS groups: Part III**

Prompts No.	NS (N=22)	NNS (N=22)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> (2-tailed)
	Mean( <i>SD</i> )	Mean( <i>SD</i> )		
# 3.1 Past tense	1.600 (.5982)	1.136 (.3155)	3.096	<b>.004</b>
#3.2 Present tense	1.800(.9234)	2.023 (.4995)	-.959	.346
#3.3 Switch from present to past tense	3.575(.5200)	3.591 (.3322)	-.119	.906
#3.4 Switch from past to present tense	2.975 (.7860)	3.250(.5722)	-1.305	.119

Note: Boldface indicates statistical significance.

Both the first two versions were considered very natural by NS informants for being consistent.

ID 19: “*Both tenses are fine as long as **the tense is maintained.***”

Some NS informants ranked #3.1(the past tense version) the most natural:

ID 15: “*Most natural – story in past tense about an event that took place in past.*”

ID 14: “*This would be the most usual written form of the story.*”

ID 17: “*This one is my first choice, it is natural.*”

ID 12: “*Good, natural, simple recounting of events.*”

Some NS informants ranked #3.1 the second in terms of naturalness as they thought the present tense is the best choice to tell a joke in this case:

ID 22: “*The tense in #3.1 is correct, but the telling of a joke is enhanced with the use of present tense.*”

Many NS informants related #3.1 to an event or story that happened in the past.

ID 3: “*I remember the first time I read this, the first one (#3.1), I was really surprised because when it went to the end, Oh, its’ joke.*”

ID 8: “*Perfectly acceptable way **to recount an event in the past** – tenses are all correct.*”

ID 9: “**Factual account given** – historical account of a verbatim conversation which indicates timing of contributions.”

Some NSs related #3.1 to a written joke:

ID 21: “*The past tense more likely to be used **when joke is produced in written form.***”

ID 2: “*Most natural for a written joke.*”

Most NS informants related #3.2 to a joke. Some thought it was the most natural tense for telling a joke, mostly spoken but sometimes written.

ID 21: “*Most common tense usage when **telling jokes.***”

ID 2: “*Natural for **a spoken joke or a written joke***”

ID 16: “***Joke**, most natural.*”

ID 12: “*This sounds **how you would tell a joke.***”

ID 5: “*Sounds more like you are **telling a joke.***”

ID 14: “*This would be often used for someone **telling the story as a joke.***”

ID 5: “***The present tense really makes me think it’s a joke, whereas when I read #3.1, I didn’t realize it’s a joke at first, you know, like I mean, I didn’t expect it to be a joke and I got there**(the end of the passage), so I realized it was (a joke). Uh... #3.2 is **more fun**, this is more fun. You’re probably prepared for it? While #3.1 is **sort of more boring**, starting out, it’s like you know, da. And I’m thinking, you know, **I should be noticing something about grammar, I’m not thinking it’s gonna be a story or that. So, #3.2 is more fun than #3.1. So my feeling, I guess, I enjoy #3.2 more than #3.1.** (laughs) this is so weird, isn’t it?*”

ID 22: “*This is 1st in terms of naturalness. **Jokes are often told in the present tense. After the first sentence, the listener will automatically understand that there will be a punch line coming up.***”

ID 20: “*Most natural of the four because of **the use of the present tense to suit the genre of telling a joke.***”

Some NS informants justified the use of present tense in telling a joke.

ID 4: “*Using present tense **gives a sense of immediacy – emphasises the humour and drama of the situation.***”

ID 8: *"I think I'm talking about the feelings, the emotions that you are trying to elicit in the listeners, in the person listening **when people sit in the pub, telling stories with a glass of beer**, they want that people listening to them to feel, he said "someone comes up to me and blablabla", and I said... **they want people to live that, live in that experience , like make it more real, make the feelings more alive, more...yeah when you tell jokes, you use present tense for that purpose. It sort of puts you in the situation more, as a listener. Um, I guess the purpose of the speaker is also it feels like living it in a sense, because he's using the present tense. That's my, my understanding of using that.**"*

ID 9: *"Punch line demands the use of present tense for some reason. **The present tense is dynamic for the moment by moment thing.** I guess that's why, other than **past which is kind of 'gone' and 'done'.**"*

ID 20: *"I think it's **an oral device, a story-telling device.**"*

ID 15: *"The use of present tense in this case **makes the story sound colloquial, the way it might be spoken informally.**"*

Some NS informants mentioned that it is natural to slip into the present tense at the punch line:

ID 9: *"This would be **the best joke format if the final word is "replied" not "replies" because that would indicate a punch line.**"*

ID 20: *"Just the genre of telling a joke, I think. A joke is often 3 or 4 lines like that, and often delivered in the present tense. Jokes are, yeah, **they are oral**, I mean an oral joke. And, and also **because this is conversation, a dialogue of two.** And maybe there is some **unwritten rule**, you know, in the genre that, **when you get to the punch line, you might slip into the present tense, 'cause it was dialogue anyway kind of thing.** 'The woman answers, dadadadada'. You know, 'cause some people put on voices when they tell jokes and things like that. So they would put on a voice for this one and a voice for that one, and that could distinguish it, you know, 'The woman answers', and then **you put on your funny voice or whatever.**"*

Nonetheless some NS informants considered the present tense not natural in this case:

ID 17: *"This one (#3.2) I would be unlikely to use."*

ID 1: *"Again, the tense is consistent, but the present tense is not as natural as simple past tense."*

Most NS informants considered #3.3 and #3.4 as unacceptable or incorrect as the tenses in them are mixed. The expressions they used to describe their feelings include "inconsistent",

*“disjointed”, “very unnatural”, “least natural”, “bad English”, “sounds a little over the place”, “rather confusing”, “highly unlikely”, and “I don’t know how I would use a joke with present to past tense.”*

There was a clear tendency among NSs that #3.3 (switching from present to past) was more natural than #3.4 (switching from past to present) although no statistically significant differences were found between them in terms of acceptability rating. Qualitative analysis of informants’ introspective interview and comments did reveal some noticeable differences where #3.4 was considered *“better”* or *“less odd”* than #3.3. For example,

ID 15: *“#3.3 is not acceptable, particularly because progression is from present to past. #3.4 is not acceptable, because tense switches halfway through. This ranks before #3.3 because at least progression is from past to present.”*

ID 2: *“# 3.3 is least natural in my opinion.”*

ID 3: *“#3.4 is more natural than #3.3, as sometimes we shift to simple tense after using past tense, to ‘speed up’ the story.”*

ID 14: *“Someone telling the story may start in one tense, and then change tense to bring the story into the present.”*

ID 20: *“#3.3 doesn’t work at all. #3.4, well, this is marginally more acceptable than #3.3, um, because we are getting to the climax, I think. So in a way, the climax is in present tense because that’s sort of the punch line. Your answer, your punch line is in present. But #3.3 doesn’t make any sense to talk, starts exciting and then to flick to the past. It just jars. Like driving along and drive over a bump, it sort of jolts you, it shocks, shocks your ear, you know, it’s marked. I guess, it doesn’t sort of flow, draws your attention, and, and then in a, in a sort of undesirable way.”*

Conversely, some NS respondents not only considered #3.4 acceptable but also ranked it as the most natural among the four versions:

ID 2: *“More natural for a spoken joke, often we begin in past tense + switch to present”*

ID 9: *“#3.4 is acceptable in any context. It emphasizes the funny part because of the tenses.”*

Some NS informants thought #3.3 was acceptable for telling a joke:

ID 14: *“In telling the story as a joke, the narrator may start off in present ‘joke’ mode, and change tense to emphasize the punch line.”*



ID 10: *“It’s still OK, but here the story-teller is trying to **create the scene for his listener**, and uses the present tense in the first two sentences for effect.”*

ID 20: *“The punch line switches tense, so that is reasonable, but better if only the real punch line, the policeman’s reply is in different tense.”*

In contrast to the mixed results found in NS responses, the NNS responses were highly consistent. Nearly all the NNS informants considered the past tense version (#3.1) the most natural and the present tense (#3.2) the second. And #3.3 and #3.4 were usually deemed unacceptable with only a few exceptions. For example:

ID 29: *“I think #3.1 and #3.2 are acceptable. #3.1 is more natural than #3.2. And I think #3.3 and #3.4 are unacceptable.”*

Another difference between the two groups was that NNSs seemed not as sensitive to the genre of joke as NS respondents. Chinese respondents seldom mentioned “joke”. Instead, they referred the passage as “narration” or “story”.

ID 24: *“#3.1 and #3.2 are **typical narration and story retelling**.”*

ID 26: *“Speaker relates **a story that has happened in the past**.”*

ID 34: *“It is natural to use past tense to recount **events that happened in the past**.”*

ID 28: *“Past tense is common **in storytelling**. Present tense is also acceptable, but mixing tenses is not acceptable.”*

ID 30: *“Telling **a story** in the present tense is natural and acceptable.”*

Some NNS respondents related the present tense (#3.2) to literary works, that is, fictional or formal writing.

ID 25: *“#3.2 is acceptable though not very common. It may **occur in literary works**. Both #3.1 and #3.2 are acceptable. The difference between them may be that #3.1 is **narrating an event that has actually happened** whereas #3.2 may be an imagined scene.”*

ID 31: *“The present tense is **ungrammatical and unnatural unless used in very formal and literary contexts**.”*

Many Chinese respondents showed recognition of the dramatic effect of the present tense by pointing out the link between the present tense and the sense of immediacy and vividness.

ID 26: “Speaker describes what is **happening right before the eyes of the listener who is drawn into the world of the story.**”

ID 30: “#3.1 is more natural than #3.2. The difference between them lies in **the level of formality or informality in tone and for the sense of immediacy of the narration. The use of present tense heightens the sense of immediacy and draws the reader closer to the narrator's world, giving the reader the impression that he/she is experiencing the event being narrated at first hand.** ”

ID 32: “#3.2 is fairly natural, but not as **formal** as the past tense. **The simple present tense can make the narration more vivid and achieve some dramatic effects. But it's not so widely used in storytelling as the simple past tense.**”

ID 44: “It seems the present tense is also correct. But I'm not as certain as in #3.1. In English, using the present tense to describe things that happened in the past seems to indicate that **something is happening now.**”

ID 37: “The present tense makes me feel that something is **happening now.**”

The switches between the present and past tenses (#3.3 and #3.4) were generally considered unacceptable or awkward by Chinese informants due to inconsistency in tense use. For example,

ID 23: “Unacceptable. It is **inconceivable that tense is used inconsistently in discourse describing the same event.**”

ID 32: “Obviously this (#3.3 and #3.4) is **artificially designed confusion!**”

Still some Chinese informants thought #3.4 acceptable as the direction of switching is from past to present.

ID 24: “#3.4 is also acceptable. **The primary tense of the recount is past tense. The shift to the simple present tense (historic present) is a device of enhancing vividness and highlighting the climax of the story.**”

ID 26: “The speaker tells the first part of the story in past tense as **historical happening** and the second part in the present tense as **if it is happening instantly.**”

ID 31: “OK if you want to **describe the situation of the joke first, then tells the focus of the joke.**”

ID 38: “It is **acceptable to switch from past to present. But switching from present to past is unnatural.**”

In general, the NS respondents showed higher acceptance rate for the use of HP than their NNS counterparts, esp. in the presence of a definite past tense reference. The NS group also demonstrated greater intra-group variations than the NNSs provided with the switch between the HP and past tense. Given no statistical differences, qualitative analysis proved more revealing and exhibited a great degree of diversity among the NS informants. The NNS informants were highly consistent in that they were reluctant to use HP in a past contextual frame.

The NS informants were able to provide a much richer description than the NNS respondents in their interpretation of the use of HP. The former could provide appropriate contexts for the use of HP and more examples of HP whereas the latter's responses were very limited. The NS informants also showed greater sensitivity towards genre differences in comparison with the NNS informants, whose mention of genre was either brief or completely absent. It appeared that it was hard for the NNS participants to appreciate the effect of HP or the present/past tense alternation. Their responses reflected little authentic experience but dogmatic impression from classroom instruction.

## **5.5 Discussion of results**

In this section, I will not only discuss the findings and highlight the significant trends but also bring together the elicited data from the survey and data collected from ethnographic observation.

I classify the factors that were taken into account by the participants from both groups into three major categories (see Figure 5.1 below): formal/surface-level factors (Section 5.5.1), conceptual/deep-level factors (Section 5.5.2) and social-psychological factors (Section 5.5.3). I will discuss these factors by turn, followed by their interaction for Chinese learners and native English speakers respectively. Section 5.5.4 discusses briefly the factor of verbal semantics. Section 5.5.5 deals with the role of learners' L1.

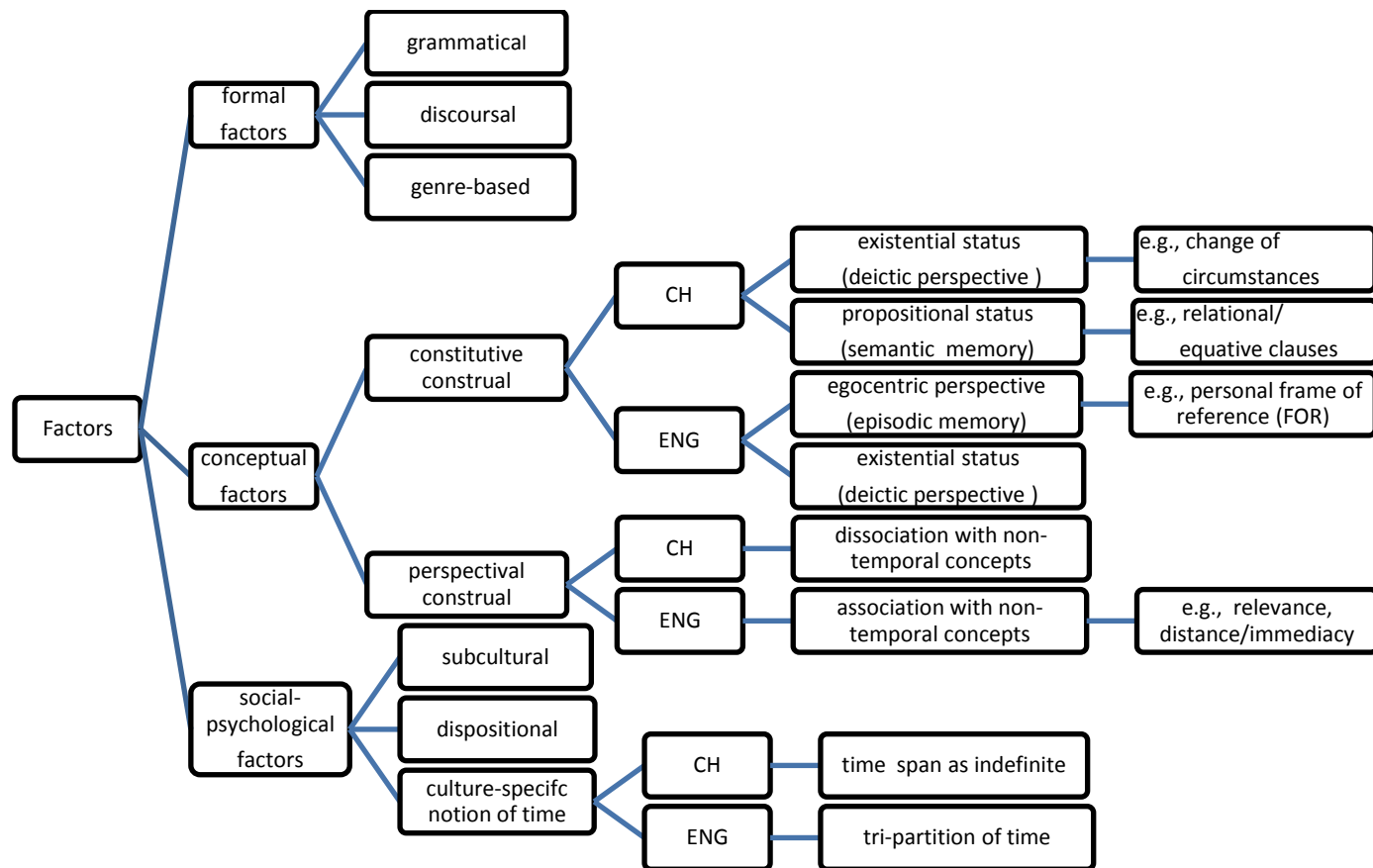
The results of the two-staged survey have shown that the NS and NNS informants in this study differed consistently not only in their tense choices and acceptability judgements but also in their interpretations of the meaning entailed by a particular tense as demonstrated by introspective data. Statistical analyses revealed that, in many cases, Chinese learners preferred present tense (except for the historical present tense) whilst English speakers preferred past or accepted the possibility of both tenses. The elicited evidence was further corroborated by observation of naturally occurring tense usage in everyday contexts, including online interactions. For example, the following two instances of the present tense found on Facebook are very typical of the usage among many Chinese learners (I say this based on my ongoing perusal and analysis of web exchanges). The speech act took place after A had finished the dumplings. The bold font indicates the (mis-)use of

the present tense associated with the verbs “*like*” and “*be*” (both of which denote a relational process).

(5.1) *A: Thank you, Shirley. The dumplings you made specially for me **are** very delicious.*

*B: I am the one should say thank you for your heart of love and caring. I'm so glad you **like** them. Wish in future I have chance to do something you like. Best wishes, Shirley.*

From my experience as a Chinese EFL learner, English teacher and researcher, I speculate that the number of occurrences of past tense recorded in the study is likely to be higher than those found in authentic English-language communication of Chinese learners, as illustrated by the above examples. I will explain the reasons in the following subsections.



**Figure 5.5 Summary of factors influencing participants' tense selection and interpretation**

### 5.5.1 Formal or surface-level factors

Formal factors are further sub-divided into grammatical, discoursal and genre factors. The grammatical factor refers to an expressed belief in the importance (or necessity) of maintaining tense consistency across main and subordinate clauses (e.g., # 1.18). The discoursal factor refers to an expressed belief in the importance (or necessity) of maintaining tense consistency with the tense used in preceding and/or following sentences (e.g., #1.15). The genre factor refers to an expressed belief in the importance (or necessity) of complying with conventional rules in tense uses (e.g., #2.7 & #2.8).

In our qualitative data, both native speakers and advanced Chinese learners exhibited considerable metalinguistic awareness of formal factors, particularly grammatical and discoursal factors. They often linked their choices and judgements of tense usage to the immediate co-text, which is naturally understandable because the co-text provided participants with the very linguistic context based on which they could construct the situational context and decide which tense should be used.

However, the choices made by advanced Chinese learners seemed to rely more directly and heavily on these two factors compared with native speakers. In many cases, Chinese learners couldn't provide further explanations other than relating their choices and judgements to the abovementioned formal factors. Hence we consider them surface-level factors. Chinese learners were not as sensitive as native speakers with respect to the genre factor, as evidenced by their reactions to prompts representing the use of historical present tense in joke telling (e.g., #3.2).

The formal cues appearing in the prompts served as more determining factors for Chinese learners than for native English speakers due to the influence of pedagogical instructions/intervention. The Chinese participants often recalled being taught in class to use past tense whenever there is a past time adverbial, either in the current sentence or the preceding sentence. Also, they were taught that if a question is asked in the past tense, the answer should be in the past tense too (e.g., #1.15 and #1.16). Classroom teaching therefore seems to have contributed to a considerable extent to the general sensitivity on the part of Chinese respondents towards the formal cues. Moreover, as the majority of English teachers in mainland China are native Chinese speakers whose understandings of English tenses are incomplete and varied, the resulting variations in teaching quality help to explain individual differences among Chinese learners.

I speculate that the formal cues existing in the survey would feature more saliently for Chinese learners than those existing in their authentic communication due to an effect of task demand.

Subsequently Chinese learners would probably produce less past tense in their own production than they did in the survey despite the presence of similar formal cues as illustrated by Example (5.1 A).

Based on my observation of the way native speakers use tense in their daily life, I suggest that English speakers would not use present tense in Example 5.1 (in A or B) – simply because the food was already finished. The following authentic conversation occurred towards the end of a meal (as reported by a native speaker as I neared the end of this study).

(5.2) *A (having finished eating): That **was** nice!*

*B (still finishing his food): Yes, it **was**! I mean, it **is**!*

B's immediate and spontaneous self-correction corroborates my own investigation into tense repairs in this study (#4.3). Both indicate that English speakers are constantly alert to the deictic aspect of experience as indicated by tense.

What factors have caused such pronounced differences in tense selection between Chinese learners and English speakers under the guise of formal constraints? We found that NSs did not stop at formal factors which seem to be the major constraints upon Chinese learners but went beyond. In their interpretations, NSs constantly indicated conceptual processes underlying formal factors. In (5.1) and (5.2) for example, the factor that came naturally to NSs was whether the food was in existence.

### **5.5.2 Conceptual or deep-level factors**

Conceptual factors, or deep-level factors, encompass factors that, in traditional terms, stand at the interface of semantics and pragmatics. We find that the role of language-specific perspectives in apprehending events is particularly crucial for informants from both groups to make tense choices/judgements. Although Chinese learners and native speakers were led by the same prompt, they were susceptible to different perspectives as evidenced by their introspective responses, thereby arriving at different tense choices. Based on the qualitative results, I propose that the preferred perspectives held by Chinese learners are characterized by the existential status of the situation encoded by the clause and the propositional status of relational/equational clauses. The language-specific perspective held by native English speakers is built on the speaker's personal frame of reference (i.e., ego-centric perspective).

The perspectives habitually taken by informants of the two languages sometimes had consequences in the respective referential information that they chose to apprehend and utter. Take prompt #1.3 (the non-completive past) for example, the results show that Chinese participants preferred the present tense whereas native speakers preferred the past tense. The typical Chinese

informants' account for the present tense was that apparently the boy in this particular prompt is not likely to be dead at the moment of speaking and, more importantly, people's eye colour is not subject to change with time. Given the same contextual and world knowledge shared with Chinese speakers, however, why did most native speakers choose to locate the boy's eye colour in the past?

The introspective data have revealed that native informants consistently indicated the speaker's personal relationship or assumed relationship with the boy. Their temporal perspective was contingent upon such pragmatic factors as "*If I expected to see the shop assistant again, or if I knew the shop assistant, I would say 'he or she has'; but if it was just someone I saw, I would say 'That person had blue eyes' "*". As it was relatively unambiguous from the linguistic and situational context that the boy was just someone the speaker saw, native informants intuitively directed and restricted their attention to the meeting time at the shop. In other words, the referential information expressed by NSs was anchored to the speaker's past experience of meeting the boy. Most native respondents were not even slightly bothered with accurately reflecting the present state of the boy's eye colour. By contrast, Chinese respondents, including those who chose the past tense, were completely ignorant of the role of personal relationship in their tense choice-making. The primary concern of Chinese learners was with the existential status of the boy's eye colour at the speech moment.

We interpret the temporal perspective of English native speakers as being oriented relatively towards to the speaker's private world. To locate an event in time is to locate it in the speaker's own frame of reference in the sense of "my past" (= my private experience in the past) and "my present" (= my present situation). It seems that native speakers have set up a personal boundary in their mind. Things/people that are categorized within the boundary are conceived as "my present" and hence expressed with the present tense. Things/people that are categorized as outside the boundary are conceived as "my past" and hence expressed in the past tense. This categorization may be dependent on the speaker's perceived relationship with the referent. We call this "ego-centric" perspective because it is built upon the speaker's personal frame of reference – whether the referent is evaluated by the speaker as personally relevant or currently active in their present life.

Chinese informants, however, did not seem to have this private boundary in their mind. In other words, they did not possess the perspective of locating an event or situation in their own past. Instead they were primarily concerned with "change of state" of the situation described by the sentence. If there is a change of circumstances with regard to the described situation, then past tense should be used to denote its completion or termination. If the situation described by the sentence still holds at the speech moment, then there is no reason why the present tense should not be used.



This difference in habitual perspectives between Chinese learners and English speakers is evident in the following example. Native speakers would say “*I loved my grandmother*” if the grandmother passed away. They would justify that since the grandmother passed away, she is not part of their current life (i.e., no actual emotional connection between them), hence the past tense. One of the native respondents offered further perception of the difference between “*love*” and “*hate*” used in identical situations:

*“I would not say ‘I love her’ about someone who has died. It may be something special about verbs related to emotions, like ‘love’ and ‘hate’? I could say ‘I hate her’ about someone who has died, for example! I’m happier to say ‘I hate her’. It suggests something else. The hatred is not affected by her death. Perhaps hatred is manifesting itself in my behaviour. It makes me angry and has an impact on my current life. So some part of the relationship is still alive and ongoing.”*

In either case, Chinese speakers would intuitively use present tense with the justification that their feeling towards their grandmother is not affected by her death at the speech moment. That is, the same feeling still obtains now and will continue into future although she might have died long time ago. The past tense seems to have a stronger connotation to imply change of circumstances for Chinese speakers than for English speakers. To say “*I loved my grandmother*” implies “*I don’t love her anymore*” for Chinese speakers rather than her death. In fact, listeners couldn’t tell whether the person being talked about is still alive or not if the same idea is expressed in Chinese. See the example below. The contestant told one of the judges in a singing contest:

(5.3) wo fuqin xihuan ni

My father LIKE you

All judges were taken aback when she revealed later that her father had passed away three months ago. English speakers have to use past tense in this context. If they wish to indicate the change of attitude, they would say “*My father used to like you.*”

I argue that the information apprehended by English speakers in non-completive past corresponds essentially to episodic memory while that of Chinese speakers in the present tense corresponds to semantic memory. As I have noted in Section 3.3, episodic memory represents our memory of experiences and specific events of personal relevance in time. For instance, many native speakers used past tense in prompts # 1.13 and particularly #1.15 as they involve the recollection of location and time that the event occurred. Episodic memory is used for more personal memories, such as the sensations, emotions and personal associations of a particular place

or time. This is exemplified in the NS interpretation of their use of past tense in #1.14 “*I’m sorry we left Chester. It **was** such a nice place.*”

*“Past tense is referring to Chester being a nice place and implies **when I was there**. It also suggests **current emotional attachment**. Present tense **refers to ‘now’**– it is still nice, **even though I am not there.**”*

While episodic memory concerns information specific to a particular context such as time and place, semantic memory concerns facts taken independent of context and allows the encoding of abstract knowledge about the world, such as “*Paris is the capital of France*”. Semantic memories may once have had a personal context, but now stand alone as general factual knowledge shared with others which is independent of personal experience and of the spatial/temporal context in which it was acquired. I argue that Chinese speakers often resort to semantic memory in the process of conceptualization. Much of their construal is abstract and relational, rather than directly related to personal experiences. Their construal of events is more prone to a more structured record of facts, meanings, concepts and knowledge. For instance, many Chinese speakers would choose present tense to convey the proposition of Obama being the 55<sup>th</sup> US President, viz., “*Obama is the 55<sup>th</sup> US President*”, as being the 55<sup>th</sup> US President is conceived by Chinese speakers as a permanent attribute of Obama. This relational construal is so entrenched among Chinese speakers that it may even apply to someone who has died. For example, it is logically correct for Chinese speakers to say “*J.F. Kennedy is the 35<sup>th</sup> US President*” even though he is dead because they conceive the propositional status of the information as mere knowledge of facts which transcends any time frame.

By contrast, English speakers would not use the present tense in the above sentence – simply because the present tense would suggest that Obama *is* the current US President. It seems that one of the reasons why Chinese speakers use more present tense than native speakers is that Chinese speakers habitually construe the relational/equational situation encoded by the clause as present out of time and as a structural part of our model of reality (Brisard 2002, Jaszczolt 2009). In other words, what is construed by Chinese learners as timeless or omnitemporal relations is construed by native speakers as particular states which only last for a long or short period. Put in logical terms, a tensed proposition like “*J.F. Kennedy is the (35<sup>th</sup>) President of the U.S.*” is true of any possible world holding at (=anchored to) sometime in the course of 1961 but is false of the objective S-world, i.e., the actual world holding at S (=speech time) (Declerck, 2011).

The memory-based analysis suggests that speakers of Chinese and English are in an essentially different informational state due to language-specific perspectives. The difference in tense selection between Chinese learners and English speakers may thus be taken to reflect a difference with regard to the referential meaning encoded by the same proposition (lexical or

descriptive) content. Given the same choice, Chinese learners' conception of the reference time indicated by the present tense seems to apply to a longer temporal span than that of native speakers. When asked "*What medicine are you on?*" or "*Are you a scholarship holder?*", Chinese speakers often feel obliged to provide more information in their responses which is not limited to the current state of affairs. They would offer the history as well.

### 5.5.3 Social-psychological factors

The social-psychological factors that influence participants' tense behaviour (both selection and interpretation) subsume subcultural factors, personal dispositional factors and socio-culturally determined factors. The kinds of factors described in the last section are influenced and indeed determined by external social, cultural and individual psychological factors. These are factors that to a large extent determine the particular types of constitutive construal and perspectival construal discussed above. In postulating a separate set of social-psychological factors, I argue that the existence of external (cultural etc.) determinants of conceptualisation and construal should be recognized, which extends the cognitive-linguistic framework.

The subcultural factors include occupation-specific perspectives. For example, the two engineers in the NS group tended to focus more on the currency of affairs hence preferred present tenses in many cases compared with other NS counterparts. Also native respondents with linguistic backgrounds were more sensitive to the effect of tense usage in academic writing. The personal dispositional factor refers to the effect of temperament and personality type (Friedman, 1990). It seems that some native informants were more nostalgia (i.e., past-oriented) than others. This factor might interact with the age variable as well. For example, one of the NS respondents aged over 80 reported that "*My way of looking at things is often different from other people.*" The abovementioned factors are considered as intervening factors which may influence participants' tense choices/judgements. They may help account for the idiosyncratic variations among informants within the same group, esp. the NS group.

Introspective data help to reveal a great deal of the interaction among various factors involved in making a particular choice. As noted above, formal factors as well as the perspective of logical relation featured predominantly for Chinese learners. The relative weight of each factor may vary for each individual and each particular prompt. They competed against each other in such a way that one may override others, thus rendering different tense choices.

For native speaker informants, formal and conceptual factors were compatible. What may appear on the surface to simply be a formal factor in terms of complying with rules of tense consistency or genre is actually a deeply ingrained cognitive pattern that affects every aspect of

tense behaviour (both selection and interpretation). Although the range of conceptual factors for NS participants was featured by egocentric perspective, they provided for all kinds of experiences to be considered, including logical relationships. The logical element was not denied its role in NS tense processing, but was stripped of the exceptional status it held in the “logical view” which was highly salient among Chinese learners and was regarded as one type of mental experience beside others. This helps explain why it was more common for NS informants to accept both tenses. They may take different perspectives with regard to a particular prompt due to different possible interpretations of situational context or different communicative goals. For example, in “*The philosopher, social scientist, historian and revolutionary, Karl Marx, is without a doubt the most influential socialist thinker to emerge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century*”, the present tense is used, in spite of the explicit past time adjunct, to emphasize the speakers’ personal commitment to the statement.

This study shows that advanced Chinese learners still lack the ability to interpret and use tense as properly as native speakers. The ability to interpret and produce tense in a contextually appropriate fashion is an important aspect of pragmatic competence (Kasper, 1997), which in turn constitutes a fundamental facet of a more general communicative competence in second language acquisition. I argue that pragmatic competence may be what makes the difference between NSs and NNSs, which in turn is related to the last important factor that influences tense choice and interpretation – socio-culturally determined cognition with respect to temporality.

Our notions of time can be culture-specific (Klein, 2008). One domain for examining these cultural differences is spatial metaphors of time (Wales, 2007). English and Chinese talk about time differently – English predominantly uses the horizontal dimension to talk about time while Chinese also commonly describes time as vertical. While it is pervasive almost all over the world that the future is the front, the Aymara people in northern Chile put the past in front.

We are more concerned with the consequences of differences in the tense and aspectual systems of Chinese and English. Lakoff (2000, p. 47) hypothesized that a language that doesn’t require formal tense endings on their verbs (like Chinese and many native American languages) encourages its speakers to see time as fluid, and time spans as indefinite and not highly salient. Based on ethnographic observation, idiomatic uses of tense are often either opaque or incomprehensible (if noticed) to Chinese learners. On the one hand, tense is redundant for speakers of a tenseless language as the way temporal information is conveyed in their mother tongue is already sufficient for them to interpret the temporal reference of the message itself. On the other hand, advanced Chinese learners often complain about having no sense as to the motivation and consequence of NSs using different tenses, say, in academic citations. Why would native speakers want to place a verbal situation with current validity into the past time-sphere? What is the implicature of a completed event being conceived of as occurring in the present time-sphere?

Lakoff proposed that languages like English that require all finite verbs to be assigned a tense – past, present, or future – strongly encourage speakers to see time as crucially important and divided into discrete segments: before-now, now, after-now. I argue the cognitive consequence of such obligatory temporal specificity for English speakers is that NSs are intuitively sensitive to the pragmatic considerations and consequences in selecting a particular tense. The connotation of past tense situations is conventionally paralleled by non-temporal concepts such as distance or specificity and that of the present tense situations is often related to proximity or generality. These grammatical “specifications” (or “redundancies” in the view of Chinese learners) sometimes indicate NSs’ cultural knowledge of the subtle relationship between temporality and modality (Jaszczolt, 2009; Nishiguchi, 2006). For example, expressing past events is seen as a matter of exhibiting evidence in favour of the fact described, of providing some kind of evidential support for a certain claim.

Lakoff also states that this hypothesis of L1-grounded notion of time, while intriguing, is unprovable, since it is impossible to step out of a language to test it. However, I believe that the arena of second language acquisition may serve as just such a testing ground.

#### **5.5.4 The factor of verbal semantics**

Many studies in L2 tense and aspect acquisition aimed to examine the Aspect Hypothesis which investigates the role of lexical aspect. Barvodi-Harlig (2012) points out that “the research on the Aspect Hypothesis represents a major area of inquiry into the development of interlanguage grammar outside of universal grammar that tends to dominate grammatical inquiry in second language acquisition today.” (p. 498). The verbs that Chinese learners often have difficulty in choosing appropriate tense usually belong in several large classes. They are commonly associated with durative (e.g., *be*, *have*), emotive (e.g., *like*) processes. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that verbal semantics alone do not constitute essential criteria for predicating learning difficulties among advanced Chinese learners. The NNS informants did not have problem using and interpreting the tenses in prototypical past context (e.g., #1.3). Some studies (e.g., Xu, 2003) found the effect of lexical aspect decreased with proficiency level. Future researchers need to be cautious to attribute the cause of learning difficulties to stative verbs.

#### **5.5.5 The factor of L1**

The impact of L1 was investigated in Yang and Huang (2004). The study found that the Chinese way of expressing temporality may reinforce the learners’ initial tendencies of relying on

pragmatic and lexical devices to indicate temporal locations. The present study is interested in the effect of L1 on tense selection and interpretation rather than pragmatic and lexical means.

The Chinese aspectual system, esp. the perfective marker *-le*, provides a potential explanatory factor for the differences between NSs and NNSs with respect to the non-completive past. As shown in Section 3.2.1, Chinese does not have a grammaticalized device to specify temporal location. There are a small group of aspect markers in Chinese to indicate various perspectives on an event such as perfective, imperfective and experiential. The perfective marker *-le* presents an event as whole without reference to its internal structure. It seems that Chinese speakers are predisposed to mark qualitative changes of state. If an internally homogeneous situation persists over time from the past to present without involving any qualitative change, Chinese speakers would habitually deem it as a whole entity and mark it as present tense. Conversely, English speakers sometimes choose past tense to make a commitment only to a subinterval of the entire situation time (Klein, 1994; Langacker, 2001). In “*There was a book on the table. It was in Russian.*”, for example, the underlined past tense indicates a time span about which the speaker makes the assertion, rather than the time at which the situation obtains.

Another aspect of crosslinguistic divergence may also be taken into account in relation to lexical semantics. Halliday & Matthiessen (1999, p. 307) propose that English processes assume success and mark the phase of attempt while Chinese processes assume attempt and mark the phase of success. Tai (2003) argues that driven by the resultative verb construction that Chinese offers, Chinese speakers attend relatively more to the result of an event, whereas English speakers attend more to the process of an event. These seem to suggest that Chinese speakers pay special attention to encode the end of an event.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusions, Implications and Suggestions**

This thesis reports an investigation into how native English speakers and advanced Chinese EFL learners (English as a foreign language) selected and interpreted the English simple present and past tenses under more and less strictly controlled conditions. Four types of tense usage have been examined in the study: a) the non-completive past, b) situations susceptible to alternative perspectives, c) tense used in academic citations, and d) historical present/past tense alternation in oral narratives.

This study provides an empirical basis for investigating the three aims proposed at the beginning of this thesis (see Section 1.5), which in turn are related to the four research questions raised in Section 4.1. In the following, Section 6.1 revisits the findings. Conclusions are reached with reference to the four research questions on the basis of these findings. Section 6.2 discusses the pedagogical and theoretical implications of the study. Section 6.3 is devoted to a discussion of its limitations as well as some suggestions for future studies.

### **6.1 Conclusions**

#### **6.1.1 Intergroup differences and intragroup variations**

The first two research questions are concerned with a) Whether there are consistent differences between NNSs and NSs of English in terms of acceptability judgements and interpretations with respect to the four types of English tense usage of interest; b) Whether there are intra-group differences – i.e. variations – within the NNS and NS groups in terms of their acceptability judgements and interpretations regarding the four types of tense usage. It can be concluded that there were both inter-group differences and intra-group variations in the selection and interpretation of the simple present and past tenses, as evidenced by quantitative and qualitative results.

With respect to the four types of tense usage, marked divergence was found between the two groups of speakers regarding the non-completive past tense as well as situations subject to dual perspectives. The quantitative analysis shows that with regard to the non-completive past, the present tense was preferred by Chinese EFL learners whereas the past tense was preferred or even obligatory for the NSs. With regard to situations subject to alternative perspectives, often either tense was acceptable in the view of the NSs for a given prompt, but Chinese EFL learners in general preferred present tense. With regard to the Historical Present tense, the NSs showed a

higher acceptability rate than the NNS informants. No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups of speakers with regard to tense used in academic citations.

A high degree of variation was found for both groups of speakers with respect to the four types of tense usage of interest in terms of acceptability judgements as well as interpretations. Respondents from each of the two groups often varied in their tense selections for many prompts in our study. The use of HP rendered itself most problematic among the four types. The opinions of the NS informants were very much divided as to which version of the joke was rated the most natural. Nearly every version had its own advocates for different reasons.

### **6.1.2 Factors influencing the use and interpretation of tenses**

The third research question focuses on the factors which affect the acceptability judgements and interpretations of the NS and NNS respondents respectively. The question *per se* is related to the first aim of the study: seeking causes that underlie the learning puzzles of advanced Chinese EFL learners. I will recapitulate below the identified causes for the learning problems encountered by advanced Chinese learners of English. It is argued that the influence of L1 is particularly pertinent to L2 tense acquisition.

The qualitative analysis indicates that both native speakers and L1-Chinese learners felt constrained by multiple factors when selecting and interpreting the two basic English tenses (see Sections 5.3 and 5.4). Although some intuitions of the NNSs resulted in a formal match with NS judgement, they were based on different criteria. For the NS group, three factors are singled out: a) assumed personal relationship, b) objective existence, c) change of circumstances. For the NNS group, some factors differ and are ranked in a different order: a) change of circumstances, b) objective existence, c) general vs. specific situations.

Certain factors affecting native speakers, notably assumed personal relationship, have not been acquired by the great majority of Chinese informants. Personal frame of reference in particular is alien to L1-Chinese learners, thus constraining them from restructuring interlanguage in accordance with NS-like grammatical norms. Even when the same types of factors (i.e., change of circumstances and objective existence) affected both native speakers and Chinese EFL learners, they had different constraining strength for the two groups of speakers. For the NSs, the factor of objective existence precedes change of circumstances. For the NNSs, the factor of change of circumstances is the overriding factor. Such qualitative divergence between the NS and NNS informants constitute perhaps the most remarkable and the most robust result of this study.

Our analysis demonstrates that the aforementioned factors may be interpreted as a function of language-specific perspectives (see Section 5.5). The speakers of the two groups hold distinct sets



of language-specific perspectives. The factor of assumed personal relationship is a manifestation of ego-centric perspective whereas the factors of change of circumstances and objective existence exemplify the perspective of existential status. Some Chinese-specific perspectives such as the abstract logical status of the content of the proposition expressed actually hindered learners' acquisition of English tense uses since logical meaning is always perceived by them as "timeless".

Chinese EFL learners may have been exposed to incomplete or erroneous interpretations of the rules or explanations which would negatively influence their understanding of the target grammar. Our investigation reveals that the above perspective-related factors are ultimately more responsible for their failure to gain access to the new habits of thought – ways of "thinking for speaking" – which could allow their tense proficiency to develop to near-native or native levels. L1 conceptual transfer is thus one of the major factors that influence L2 tense development.

### **6.1.3 Relevance of findings to the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis**

The last research question is devoted to exploring whether the acceptability judgements and interpretations offered by the NNS and NS informants are grounded in different conceptualizations of situations. This question corresponds with the third aim of the study which invokes the concept of linguistic relativity (see Section 1.5). The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis (LRH) postulates broadly that native speakers of different languages categorize and reason about the world quite differently. This study has yielded empirical evidence that supports what is regarded as a weak version of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis, viz. Slobin's thinking-for-speaking hypothesis. Slobin (1991, 1996) argues that conceptualization as a component of language production is always based on language-specific principles. In the present study, the ways in which speakers of English and Chinese used and interpreted the simple past and present tenses in English indicate how they conceptualized the events reported differently.

I argue that the perspectives specific to the two groups of speakers are a result of typological differences between their first languages. Perspective taking, according to Macwhinney (2005), is at the very core of language structure and belongs to higher-level cognition. The perspective encoded by grammatical tense is deictic or egocentric. Speakers of English are required by their grammar to construe temporal location along a speaker-centred timeline as a compulsory ideational aspect of every message. The default deictic centre in English – the speaker-now – is thus the implicit cognitive anchor of all experiences. For English speakers, the very same situation may be tensed as present if it is viewed as an ongoing, incomplete situation, i.e. as if from the inside (the internal view), or as past, if it is viewed as a completed whole, from the outside as it were (the external view).

Speakers of Chinese also have the concepts of past and present. Nevertheless, since tense as an obligatory grammatical category is absent in Chinese, the concepts of presentness or pastness for speakers of Chinese are not very salient and the distinction is not always made in speaking (and writing). When the temporal distinction is made explicit, it is solely based on a situation or event's position in real time, in contrast to the subjective manipulations of the timeline among English speakers. For Chinese speakers, the time of utterance is taken as a valid reference point, yet barely with any additional subjective attachment. The temporal location of events is treated as an objective phenomenon, not necessarily relevant to the present of the speaker-now.

## **6.2 Implications of the study**

The present study was initially motivated by the learning difficulties experienced by advanced Chinese learners of English. It was carried out in the hopes that the findings would lead to some more effective pedagogical methods which assist learners acquire native-like understandings and control of the simple present and past tenses. In the following sections, I will discuss the pedagogical implications of the study first (Section 6.2.1) and then proceed to a discussion of its theoretical implications (Section 6.2.2).

### **6.2.1 Pedagogical implications**

In this section, I will point out four implications of the present study for language teaching. Section 6.2.1.1 suggests that it might be useful for teachers to get acquainted with a cognitively-oriented theory of tense. Section 6.2.1.2 emphasizes the role that extralinguistic and linguistic contexts play in pragmatic connotation of tense uses. Section 6.2.1.3 suggests a hierarchy of learning difficulties for teachers with regard to the four types of tense usage investigated in this study. Section 6.2.1.4 extends the implications of the present study to teaching English grammatical aspect to Chinese learners as well as to teaching tense to other L1 tenseless learners.

#### ***6.2.1.1 Cognitive approach to the understanding of tense and L2 tense teaching***

The research reported here leads me to suggest that a cognitively-oriented theory of tense could provide a natural and promising basis for the teaching and learning of English tenses for advanced Chinese EFL learners. Such a framework would not only allow teachers themselves to gain essential technical knowledge about the nature and functioning of grammatical tense, but also allow them to gain important insights into their beliefs concerning pedagogical practices.

Most Chinese-speaking teachers of English in China lack a clear understanding of tense themselves. They often uphold orthodox, normative beliefs regarding how tense should be taught.

Even native English-speaking teachers are sometimes caught in a dilemma when asked to explain the many ways tenses are actually used. Both native and non-native English teachers rely overly on the types of tense conventions provided in pedagogical grammars and writing manuals, many of which are linked with discourse constraints that apply differently to different genres. Nevertheless, teachers and learners often find that these descriptions of discourse-related “rules” are inadequate. In academic citations in research articles for example, both past and present simple can be used to make reference to past work. The choice of tense is extremely flexible when referring to what was said or written by other researchers. As Hinkel (2002, p.196) aptly points out, “[o]ne of the reasons that many practicing EFL and ESL teachers often become disenchanted with grammar book learning is that pedagogical grammar rules are frequently simplistic and do not account for the large number of cases or examples that learners come across in real life.”

Traditional approaches to grammar teaching pay little, if any, attention to the effects of construal on tense uses and interpretations. In line with the cognitive account of tense meaning, teachers should encourage students to discard the idea that tense is a direct reflection of objective reality. Part of the teacher’s role is to make the status of construal explicit and clear in teaching. Constitutive construal and perspectival construal (see Sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3), for example, may serve as effective tools in explaining native usage when an exclusive time reference approach to the semantics of tense is adopted.

Constitutive construal may account for the use of non-completive past. While the importance of past contextual temporal frame has received due attention in L2 teaching (e.g., Hinkel, 1997), the findings of this study show that teachers could also bring the learner’s attention to the role of past memory. The study suggests that given identical communicative tasks, native English speakers tend to resort to episodic memory (i.e., memory for personally experienced events) whereas Chinese learners tend to resort to semantic memory (i.e., memory for all kinds of knowledge, such as general factual knowledge). Teachers could encourage the kind of memory that allows learners to “mentally travel” in time, and thus not merely recollect but reconstitute their past experiences of events which they have either observed or participated in.

Perspectival construal may account for the use of tense in academic citations and HP in oral narratives. The same event may be viewed in various ways. In academic citations, for example, speaking from the viewpoint of some past writer, past tense should be used. Writing from the present point of view in regard to extant works and their meaning today, present tense should be used. Likewise, HP is used to reconstruct the event from the narrator’s own point of view.

Discussions of language-specific patterns of conceptualization are crucially important in teaching and learning English tenses. Some of the tense uses are so subjective and idiosyncratic it

could hardly be construed as a tense system that could be learnable. The L2 learner has to step into the cultural shoes and mindset of the NSs in order to be able to use the verb system in the same way as an NS. One implication of the present study is that teachers should be able to pinpoint the differences in thinking patterns between speakers of Chinese and English. English-specific perspectives on event construal should be contrasted with the typical perspectives held by Chinese learners. While the former are characterized by ego-centric perspective (e.g., the speaker's personal frame of reference), the latter are characterized by existential status and propositional status.

#### **6.2.1.2 The relation between pragmatic connotation and context**

The choice of tense invites inferences and provides overtones. NSs are intuitively sensitive to various pragmatic considerations and consequences in selecting a particular tense. For instance, the tense correction in the following sentence clearly indicates how the speaker changed his mind about the subjective status of a past event. Sheldon first believed that he had lost Glen, his ostrich in a computer game, for good after it was stolen by some hacker, hence he used the past tense, showing the end of relationship. Then he decided that he would not give up hope of ever finding it back and changed to present tense.

(6.1) *Sheldon: No. Glenn's **was** leather. He **was** a simple ostrich. **Is! Is**, I haven't given up hope.*<sup>20</sup>

It is thus important for teachers to help Chinese learners understand that tense is not redundant. All grammatical choices actually have meaningful consequences in communication. There is a wide range of things tense does beyond the mere indication of temporal relations. Teachers may explicate to their students the affinity between time reference and the non-temporal senses of "pastness" and "presentness" tacitly held by English speakers, as demonstrated by the above example. This kind of explicit consciousness raising is absent in most existing pedagogical practices. It would help learners to unpack the connotative meanings generally inherent in native tense usage. Teachers may thus help learners to discover the subtle difference in meaning and rhetorical effects that are consciously or unconsciously achieved.

This, of course, entails a focus on context of situation and context of discourse (as revealed in the co-text, the text or discourse surrounding the expression). Teachers can provide opportunities for learners to identify and analyse for themselves the tenses used in everyday conversations as well as literary works. For instance, successful novelists with sophisticated language skills often use tense in highly pointed ways (e.g., Ondaatje's (1992) novel *The English patient*). Hopefully,

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<sup>20</sup> From the transcripts of TV series "The Big Bang theory": <http://bigbangtrans.wordpress.com/series-4-episode-19-the-zarnecki-incursion/>

learners may learn to recognize the expressivity of grammatical devices through proper linguistic analysis, especially in cases where a time orientation is not overtly identified.

Besides, teachers should encourage learners to develop an awareness of other closely correlated language features such as subject/verb choice and the overall sentence structure, which go beyond the focus on tense itself. Emphasis needs to be placed on how these features all collaborate to achieve the actual communicative purpose.

#### **6.2.1.3 A hierarchy of learning difficulties with respect the four types of tense usage**

The four types of tense usage investigated in this study may serve as a basis for teaching and learning English tenses to L1-Chinese learners. A hierarchy of learning difficulties is suggested below regarding whether advanced EFL Chinese learners may overcome inhibiting influence of their native language to access the NS intuition. I argue that the acquisition of the non-completive past is the most accessible through classroom instruction while the acquisition of the HP or present/past tense alternation constitutes the most difficult part of the tense system. It might be almost impossible to bridge the gap in the latter. Teachers could use enhanced input and focused noticing to encourage learners to notice the differences between their own grammar and target grammar. Their attention may be focused on the use of HP through exercises which demand careful observation of particular uses, e.g., how the native speakers shift between the past and present tenses.

The use of non-completive past can be acquired. With respect to non-completive past, learners can revise their grammars on the basis of positive evidence. Positive evidence is any input which shows a learner what sentences, constructions, or combinations are possible in a language. In this case, the goal is to provide learners with environments in which the simple past may be underused by learners and examples of simple past with *statives*. For example, learners are encouraged to focus on the use of simple past with the copular constructions *be* in situations that may persist till the present.

With respect to situations subject to dual perspectives, the use and interpretation of tense is also teachable. Learners should attempt to determine the semantic or pragmatic conditions that lead to the selection of alternative tenses through conscious raising. The speaker's beliefs, for example, may play a crucial role in determining choice of tenses. Academic citation is considered a special type of dual perspectives. A possible way of characterizing the use of tense in academic citations which sets it off from observing discourse conventions is to map its various contextually supplied meanings onto the basic temporal meaning of tense. It is advised that teachers should necessarily strike a balance between entertaining an outlook on "discourse grammar" and the time

reference account, rather than separating or even confronting them as suggested in some previous studies (e.g., Eriksson, 2008).

#### ***6.2.1.4 Implications for teaching grammatical aspect and other L1 tenseless learners***

Meanwhile, this study also hopes to contribute to the teaching of English aspect to Chinese learners. Cognitive linguistics takes grammatical aspect as a cognitive category, too (Boogaart & Janssen, 2007; Evans & Green, 2006; Patard & Brisard, 2011; Taylor, 2002). The choice of grammatical aspect also represents speakers' subjective construal of the world (Blyth, 1997; Lunn, 1985; Lunn & Albrecht, 1997), rather than reflecting "an absolute, observer-dependent shaping of a state or action" (Hopper, 1982, p.4). This cognitive approach to grammatical aspect may explain some uses of the present perfect and the progressive aspect in English which are also difficult for Chinese learners to acquire.

Finally, language teachers may find that the explanation of English tense usage offered in this study applies to the acquisition of tense (and aspect) by learners with mother tongues other than Chinese, particularly speakers of other tenseless languages. It is always difficult to explicate the use of such fundamental grammatical categories in one language for speakers of another language in which the system is extremely different. On the one hand, the learning problems that these L1-Chinese learners would face may be essentially connected with the subjective nature of tensed sentences irrespective of the particular target language involved. On the other hand, it is likely that speakers of other tenseless languages are subject to the influence of L1-specific perspectives which are grounded in typological differences.

#### **6.2.2 Theoretical implications**

I have suggested above that our data are best accounted for if we assume that speakers of Chinese and English hold distinct patterns of event categorization and construal. I argue that these findings not only have theoretical implications for the issue of ultimate attainment in SLA (Section 6.2.2.1) but also for an inherently subjective characterization of tense meanings and uses (Section 6.2.2.2), the latter related to the second aim of the study (see Section 1.5), i.e., the nature of tense. The way of looking at tense adopted in this study and the specific choice of theoretical stand on the tense issue in general is prompted by SLA research questions. Finally, I argue that the present study sheds light on typological impacts on the variability of human conceptualization in relation to the core human dimensions of time (Section 6.2.2.3).

### **6.2.2.1 Ultimate attainment in SLA**

Although the interlanguage system changes during the lifetime of a learner, it seems clear from the data that the advanced Chinese learners of English who participated in this study have not learnt to emulate NSs' intuitions regarding tense use and interpretation. The study shows that the subtle difference in meaning between the present and past tenses may be difficult to state yet intuitively clear to native speakers. The NS respondents could contextualize the prompt sentences and assign various readings based on extralinguistic factors. By contrast, Chinese learners of English often fail to identify with the NSs' subjective perspectives with regard to the meanings of prompts whose propositional content is identical or nearly so. This may be as attributed to interlanguage fossilization (e.g., Han, 2004; Selinker & Lakshamanan, 1992).

### **6.2.2.2 Subjective nature of tense**

The treatment of tense remains controversial in the field of theoretical linguistics. The four types of tense usage investigated in this study pose problems for traditional accounts of tense which defines tense as a grammatical category that establishes a relationship between two time locations: the time of utterance and the time of the situation referred to (Comrie, 1985, p.1; Lyons, 1968, p.304-306, and 1977, p.678). Unfortunately, much supposedly state-of-art research in SLA generally subscribes to this traditional, objectivist characterization of tense without probing into its subjective nature of tense.

A unifying theory of tense meaning, i.e., one valid for all types of tense usage, must take the subjective meanings of speakers into account. The data of the present study indicate that native speaker tense choices do not simply and naturally reflect events and situations along an objectively sequenced timeline. Very often they should be taken as "subjective" choices on the part of the speaker, reflecting two aspects of event construal: constitutive and perspectival construal. Firstly, what is being located relative to the time of utterance is a "conceptual" event rather than an objectively delineated event (Foley, 1997). The present study has indicated that, in the non-completive past, what is actually being talked about by L1-Chinese learners is not coextensive with what is being talked about by English speakers in terms of the temporal span attended to. This marked difference demonstrates that the time of the situation referred to is subject to construal.

Secondly, tense meaning for native speakers has an inherent relationship to each speaker's own subjectively constructed timeline. Tense encodes psychological time rather than objective time (Lewis, 1986). The notion of time is sometimes employed metaphorically by English native speakers to characterize a psychological perception or stance, such as proximity or distance. For

example, an event whose pastness is taken for granted may not be marked as past, as native speakers may actively hold it at the center stage of mind and perceive it at the moment of speaking as vividly as if it actually occurred in the present.

The findings of this study also suggest that the reasons for making appropriate tense choices, in spontaneous utterances and in connected discourse, may be deeper and more subjective than is typically represented in discourse- or genre- dependent “rules” or conventions. It may be not genre as such that affects tense choice and interpretation, but rather the subjective perspective from which one recounts an event or describes a state of affairs. Underlying various more or less conventionalized types of tense use are the preferred cognitive perspectives that are collectively taken by the English-speaking community for granted, as a shared linguistic and indeed cultural resource. Thus for individual native English speakers, the use of a particular verbal tense is a matter of the speakers’ creative and/or strategic choice. Moreover, NSs vary considerably amongst themselves, too, in terms of preferential tense usage. The choices they make are conditioned by specific cognitive and communicative factors rather than “fixed” rules or conventions.

### ***6.2.2.3 The relation between grammar and cognition***

Grammar provides us with frames of reference to categorise, conceptualise and encode events. As a result, some features of experienced reality are more salient than others for speakers of different languages. The processing of grammatical categories like tense and aspect in speech production and understanding must be extremely fast and often takes place without conscious awareness or attention. It can only be allocated a restricted amount of processing resources. This raises the question of the nature of the cognitive mechanisms underlying the use of tense and aspect.

Tense and aspect as grammatical categories are closely connected with concepts such as time and event, which are by all accounts fundamental to human thinking. In this connection, I conjecture that speakers of tensed and tenseless languages may hold tacitly different cognitive orientations to the experience of temporality. In particular, tense and aspect concern distinct temporal frames of reference to the frames applicable to the content of the proposition expressed. Speakers of typologically different languages such as English and Chinese impose grammatical distinctions on situations in the course of describing them – just as artists impose perspectives on scenes in the act of painting them. In contrast to tense marking which emphasizes the speaker’s (objective or subjective) “now” as the ultimate point of orientation, aspectual marking construes the event as either imperfective or perfective relative to the context, not necessarily the egocentric deixis or deictic centre.

The Chinese way of conceptualizing events may be compared to the characteristic perspective represented in classical scrolls: each section of the scroll is seen from a different viewpoint as if by a passing traveller, i.e., from a moving vantage viewpoint– in which perspective is flattened –



rather than from a fixed viewpoint. An egocentric perspective is inherent in native English speakers. That is, English native speakers are “relatively oriented” with regard to relationship. It is as if they have set up a personal boundary in their mind. Things that are categorized as being within the boundary are current and should be expressed with the present tense. Things that are not considered to be within the boundary, while belonging to “my” past should be expressed in the past tense. This distinction is personal/ego-centric because it depends on the speaker’s own judgment. Chinese speakers, however, seem not to have this sort of personal boundary in their minds. Their grammar encode an interest in conveying whether or not there is a “change of state” with regard to the objective situation described, and for example commonly marks the end of a particular situation with aspectual marker. In this sense they are “absolutely oriented”.

### **6.3 Limitations and suggestions for future studies**

The factors identified in this study are not intended to comprise an exhaustive list of all those potentially influencing tense selection and interpretation for the two groups. The list is limited due to the following reasons. Firstly, the data gathered from this present study mainly consisted of elicited responses based on prompts. Naturally occurring tense choices in spontaneous socially-situated discourse are beyond the scope of the present inquiry. Future studies may look at how native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners select tenses in the context of authentic communication. Secondly, the Chinese participants in this study were advanced EFL learners. The results from a different population made up of advanced ESL learners or near-native learners may be different from those of the present study.

As for the method developed and applied in this study, it could be improved by introducing a computer program to record various objective facets of the real-time production such as participants’ response time. The results could serve as useful indicators, to track a further point of difference between NSs and NNSs. Furthermore an online survey is also recommended for future research so that data can be collected from a larger population and the tendencies among NSs and NNSs could be more obvious.

Previous research has investigated the acquisition of temporality by L1-tensed learners of Chinese (Huang, Yang, & Sun, 2000; Huang, Yang, & Tickoo, 1999; Jin 2002; Jin & Hendriks, 2003; Sun, 2006; Yang, 2002; Yang, Huang, & Sun, 1999). It would be interesting for future studies to look at how these learners feel about being unspecified about temporal location, and to examine whether the Chinese aspectual system poses learning problems due to the semantic complexity of its aspect markers as well as cross-linguistic differences between L1 and L2 from the perspective of subjective construal.

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## Appendix

### English Usage Survey

- This survey aims to clarify different understandings of the English tenses that may be held by native speakers and advanced Chinese learners of English.
- English has two basic tenses: present and past. For example: *She goes* versus *She went*.
- This survey has four parts. In it you are invited to **reflect on your OWN understandings and uses** of the two key tenses mentioned above. **Crucially, you are also asked to DISTINGUISH between different possible meanings** expressed by sentences where the verb is in the simple present or past tense. Please feel free to add your comments in as few or as many words.

## General Guidelines

- ❖ This survey is NOT a test. It is interested in **your personal opinions** and thus there are **no "correct" or "incorrect" answers**.
- ❖ Say the sentences out loud, and choose the way that you would **NORMALLY** practice.
- ❖ **It's perfectly OK** if you wish to change your mind about any answers during or since doing the survey.
- ❖ **Don't worry about "grammatical correctness" prescribed by textbooks or even grammar books.** (Modern linguists do not believe that there is any correct grammar beyond what people NORMALLY say). **Just reflect on your own understandings and uses. YOUR OWN FEELING for the situation in which different tenses might be used is really what counts here.**
- ❖ **Don't worry about justifying your choice. The researcher is interested in any POTENTIAL or POSSIBLE difference** expressed by statements using different tenses, i.e., **how you FEEL** about them and whether one suggests something different from another. Consider the following suggestions:

<i>Both acceptable, but with different emphases</i>	<i>Both acceptable, equally good</i>
<i>Both acceptable, but used in different contexts/situations</i>	<i>Both acceptable, A is better/preferred</i>
<i>Both acceptable, but used to express different things</i>	<i>Both acceptable, B is preferable</i>
<i>Both acceptable, with little or no difference (interchangeable)</i>	<i>A in general, sometimes B</i>

## Part I

- For the following sentences, please choose the item that contains the appropriate tense choice OR indicate that both are acceptable OR that you are not sure. Please consider the whole situation when making your choice.
- **Just trust your instinct. However, you will have an opportunity to reflect on your choice.**
- If your answer is C (both acceptable), try **to indicate any difference that you may FEEL in meaning (direct or implied) or in use (e.g. used in different contexts/situations) between the two choices.** An asterisk (\*) signals that you need to write your comments in the space where it says “Your comments”.

<p>(1a) The animal you saw _____ a possum; see, there he is running up a tree.</p> <p><b>(A) is      (B) was      (C) both acceptable*      (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p>(   )</p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(1b) The animal you saw _____ a possum; this picture in the guidebook proves it.</p> <p><b>(A) is      (B) was      (C) both acceptable*      (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p>(   )</p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(2a) Anna: When I was with you at the shop today, I spoke to that really cute assistant. But I don't remember what colour eyes he <u>  1  </u>.</p> <p><i>Beth might answer Anna in two ways:</i></p> <p>Beth: I remember! He <u>  2  </u> blue eyes.</p> <p>Beth: I remember! The boy you spoke to <u>  3  </u> blue eyes.</p> <p><b>(A)has      (B) had      (C) both acceptable*      (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>1(   ) 2(   ) 3(   )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>

<p>(2b) Anna: I spoke to a boy on the phone today. I wonder what colour eyes he <u>  1  </u>.</p> <p>Beth: Well, I don't have a clue either.</p> <p>Anna: Maybe you know him...his name is Harry Smith.</p> <p><i>Beth might answer Anna in two ways:</i></p> <p>Beth: Oh, Harry Smith! The boy you spoke to <u>  2  </u> blue eyes.</p> <p>Beth: Oh, Harry Smith! He <u>  3  </u> blue eyes.</p> <p><b>(A)has (B) had (C) both acceptable* (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>1 ( ) 2 ( ) 3 ( )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(3a) Shakespeare_____ a renowned playwright.</p> <p><b>(A)is (B) was (C) both acceptable* (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>( )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(3b) Shakespeare _____ a notorious drunkard.</p> <p><b>(A)is (B) was (C) both acceptable* (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>( )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(4a) [<i>Coming out of the theatre</i>]</p> <p>"Gee, that _____ a great movie! I'm sure it will win an award. "</p> <p><b>(A)is (B) was (C) both acceptable* (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>( )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(4b) It _____ an excellent movie. It is a masterpiece of cinematic art.</p> <p><b>(A) is (B) was (C) both acceptable* (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>( )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(5) [<i>The speaker, who is at a flea market, is trying to explain why she bought the second-hand item she is holding.</i>]</p> <p>It _____ have any stains on it.</p> <p><b>(A) doesn't (B) didn't (C) both acceptable* (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>( )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(6) I'm sorry we left Chester. It _____ such a nice place.</p> <p><b>(A) is (B) was (C) both acceptable* (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>( )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>

<p>(7) A: Did you see the house we just passed?</p> <p>B: No. What about it?</p> <p>A: It _____ a green and orange roof.</p> <p><b>(A)has      (B)had      (C) both acceptable*   (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>(   )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(8) Ann: Do you remember that Danish family we met in Majorca last summer?</p> <p>Bob: You mean Kirsten and Ole? They _____ Danish --- they _____ Norwegian.</p> <p><b>(A) aren't... are                      (B) weren't... were</b></p> <p><b>(C) both acceptable*              (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>(   )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(9) Apart from Roger Federer, who _____ the last male No. 1 seed to win the Grand Slam title?</p> <p><b>(A) is      (B) was      (C) both acceptable*      (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>(   )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(10) "I'm sorry," she said, "but I told Mr. Martin yesterday that we _____ not thinking of selling."</p> <p><b>(A) are      (B)were      (C) both acceptable*      (D) not sure*</b></p>	<p><b>(   )</b></p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>

## Part II

- The following pairs of sentences are identical except for their tense uses.
- Please indicate how **acceptable/unacceptable** you think each example of tense use is by using the following scale.

Completely unacceptable	Can't decide	Barely acceptable		Fairly acceptable		Very natural
-1	0	1	2	3	4	5

- If you think both tenses are acceptable, **is there any difference in meaning (direct or implied) that you may feel between the two sentences?** (Tip: Try imaging a situation where one choice is preferred over the other.)

(1a) My daughter's father <u>was</u> Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years.	( ) Your comments:
(1b) My daughter's father <u>is</u> Brazilian. He stays in contact with Suzanna, but I haven't seen him in years.	( ) Your comments:
(2a) Mother: Your Sherri's late. Son: Mum...Sherri and I broke up. Mother: Not Sherri? I <u>liked</u> Sherri. I <u>didn't</u> like the other girls you brought home.	( ) ( ) Your comments:
(2b) Mother: Your Sherri's late. Son: Mum...Sherri and I broke up. Mother: Not Sherri? I <u>like</u> Sherri. I <u>don't</u> like the other girls you brought home.	( ) ( ) Your comments:



(3a) Smith (1980) <u>argued</u> that Britain is no longer a country in which freedom of speech is seriously maintained.	( ) <b>Your comments:</b>
(3b) Smith (1980) <u>argues</u> that Britain is no longer a country in which freedom of speech is seriously maintained.	( ) <b>Your comments:</b>
(4a) What you just stepped on <u>was</u> a nettle.	( ) <b>Your comments:</b>
(4b) What you just stepped on <u>is</u> a nettle.	( ) <b>Your comments:</b>
(5a) They were very tired, because the slope they were climbing <u>was</u> steep.	( ) <b>Your comments:</b>
(5b) They were very tired, because the slope they were climbing <u>is</u> steep.	( ) <b>Your comments:</b>
(6a) In 1837, Dickens <u>completes</u> the <i>Pickwick Papers</i> . They <u>are</u> enthusiastically received by many critics. He <u>moves</u> to York and <u>marries</u> his grand-niece Joan. In 1838, they <u>are</u> divorced again.	( ) <b>Your comments:</b>
(6b) In 1837, Dickens <u>completed</u> the <i>Pickwick Papers</i> . They <u>were</u> enthusiastically received by many critics. He <u>moved</u> to York and <u>married</u> his grand-niece Joan. In 1838, they <u>were</u> divorced again.	( ) <b>Your comments:</b>

### Part III

- The following passages are all identical except for their uses of tense. After you have viewed all the four versions, **please indicate if any one of them is unacceptable or unnatural and try to order the others in terms of naturalness, with the most natural first.**
- Compare the versions that are acceptable and **describe any difference in meaning (direct or implied) that you may feel.**

<p>(a)</p> <p>A policeman <u>stopped</u> a woman and <u>asked</u> for her license.</p> <p>He <u>said</u> "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."</p> <p>The woman <u>answered</u> "Well, I have contacts."</p> <p>The policeman <u>replied</u> "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!"</p>	<p>( )</p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(b)</p> <p>A policeman <u>stops</u> a woman and <u>asks</u> for her license.</p> <p>He <u>says</u> "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."</p> <p>The woman <u>answers</u> "Well, I have contacts."</p> <p>The policeman <u>replies</u> "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!"</p>	<p>( )</p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(c)</p> <p>A policeman <u>stops</u> a woman and <u>asks</u> for her license.</p> <p>He <u>says</u> "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."</p> <p>The woman <u>answered</u> "Well, I have contacts."</p> <p>The policeman <u>replied</u> "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!"</p>	<p>( )</p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>

<p>(d)</p> <p>A policeman <u>stopped</u> a woman and <u>asked</u> for her license.</p> <p>He <u>said</u> "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."</p> <p>The woman <u>answers</u> "Well, I have contacts."</p> <p>The policeman <u>replies</u> "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!"</p>	<p>( )</p> <p><b>Your comments:</b></p>
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## Part IV

<p>(1) What was it that enabled you to decide on tense uses in this survey? Choose from the list below. You may choose more than one thing.</p> <p><b>(A) Intuition</b></p> <p><b>(B) Education (teachers, grammar books, etc.)</b></p> <p><b>(C) Native speakers' usage</b></p> <p><b>(D) Other sources (please specify)*</b></p>	<p>(    )</p> <p><b>* Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(2) What do you think are the main factors in selecting tenses in academic citations? E.g. <i>Chomsky (1957) <u>claims/claimed</u> that...</i></p> <p><b>(A) Time of publication</b></p> <p><b>(B) Relevance</b></p> <p><b>(C) Agreement with the author's view</b></p> <p><b>(D) Other factors (please specify)*</b></p>	<p>(    )</p> <p><b>* Your comments:</b></p>
<p>(3) The following two examples contain tense "corrections". Please explain the reason for corrections.</p> <p>(3.1) When spotting a nice car on the street, Adele thought of her cousin living in America, and said, "Emily <u>had</u> the same car... I mean, Emily <u>has</u> the same car."</p>	<p><b>Are these corrections acceptable to you?</b></p> <p><b>If yes, please explain the reason for corrections.</b></p> <p><b>If no, why not?</b></p> <p><b>(3.1)</b></p>
<p>(3.2) Anne: Jane just bought a Volvo.</p> <p>John: Maureen <u>has</u> one.</p> <p>Anne: John, Maureen <u>had</u> one. You've got to quit talking about Maureen as if you were still going together. You broke up three months ago.</p>	<p><b>(3.2)</b></p>

<p>(3.3) Try to recall similar situations where tense repairs were made if you can, and explain the reason for repair.</p>	<p><b>(3.3) Your example(s):</b></p>
<p>(4) Speakers of English sometimes say: “I <u>have</u> <b>this friend, ...</b>” and sometimes they say: “I <u>had</u> <b>this friend, ...</b>” regardless of whether this friend is still around or not.</p>	<p><b>(4.1) Can you explain why native speakers might choose each of them?</b></p> <p><b>(4.2) Can you finish each of the sentences?</b></p> <p><b>(4.3) If the friend is still your friend, can you see any reason to use the past tense?</b></p>

**The End**

**Thank you very much for your participation!**