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Language, Volume 57, Number 1, March 1981, pp. 45-62 (Article)

Published by Linguistic Society of America
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.1981.0011*

TENSE VARIATION IN NARRATIVE

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The narrative is a naturally bound unit of discourse in which both formal and functional aspects of grammatical variation can be examined in a controlled and systematic way. This paper is a quantitative analysis of the past and the historical-present tenses as alternative ways of referring to past events in narrative. It shows how the organization of narrative delimits the area in which the historical present can occur, and how various structural and functional constraints restrict (or favor) switching between the two tenses. It also shows that the historical present evaluates narrative events because it is a use of the present tense, and that switching out of the historical present separates narrative events from each other.*

The oral narrative is an ideal site for the quantitative study of variation in discourse; because it is a naturally bound unit of discourse with a regular internal structure, both formal and functional aspects of variation can be examined in a controlled and systematic way. However, despite much recent work on how narratives are constructed and performed (e.g. Bennett 1977, Knapp 1976, Labov 1972, Polanyi 1979), there has been little use of quantitative methods in the analysis of grammatical variation within narrative. Thus we have, on the one hand, a well-developed methodology for analysing linguistic variation, and, on the other hand, a rich body of qualitative descriptions of narrative, but few studies which utilize the advantages of both approaches.

This paper examines tense variation in narrative. The HISTORICAL-PRESENT TENSE—the use of the present tense to refer to past events—alternates with the PAST TENSE in narrative. In the following fragment of narrative, events are understood as having occurred prior to the moment of speaking, regardless of the tense of the verb:[1]

* I am indebted to Anthony Kroch and William Labov for helpful comments on and criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper. Anne Bower, John Fought, Phyllis Nudelman, Ellen Prince, and Louis Scavo have also provided useful suggestions. An earlier and shorter version, using slightly different data, was presented at the 1978 LSA Annual Meeting, Boston.

[1] Narratives used in this study were primarily from sociolinguistic interviews conducted by members of a research project studying language change and variation in the Philadelphia speech community (NSF-75-00245, Principal Investigator: William Labov), and to a lesser extent from data collected by members of the Linguistics 560 class in 1976 and 1977. I thank everyone for allowing me access to their narratives. Special thanks go to Anne Bower, whose own interest in narratives no doubt contributed to her success in eliciting them—and, of course, to William Labov, whose systematic collection of narratives made the job of looking for the HP much easier.

Note that Wolfson 1976, 1978 has argued that narratives told during sociolinguistic interviews are not likely to contain the HP—that it is more likely when speaker and hearer share norms of interpretation and evaluation. As Anthony Kroch has suggested (p.c.), increased use of the HP in interview narratives can thus be seen as an indication of better fieldwork methods, with interviews becoming more like natural conversational situations. For descriptions of sociolinguistic fieldwork methods in general, and of methods used in the Philadelphia project, see Labov et al. 1979.

In all examples of excerpts from narratives, only clauses which represent narrative events (clauses in the complicating action section) are lettered. Each line of transcript with a letter preceding it contains one complicating action clause, and the letter indicates only the clause on that

(1) a. Then all of a sudden everybody gets involved.
b. and they made a mess.
c. So uh ... this lady says ... uh this uh Bert, 'Oh, my son'll make them. He's an electrician.'
d. So he makes them,
e. and he charges all the neighbors twenty dollars a set, and there I paid three dollars.
f. So I called her a crook.
g. And I called her son a crook.
h. So, they were really mad at me.

Here clauses b and f–h contain past-tense verbs (P), while clauses a and c–e contain historical-present verbs (HP).[2]

Although the HP conveys the same referential information as the P, its function in narrative has been said to go beyond the establishment of a referential meaning. Traditional analyses (e.g. Curme 1931, Diver 1963, Jespersen 1931, Joos 1964, Leech 1971, Palmer 1965) suggest that it is a stylistic device used in narrative to report past events which are vivid and exciting. Several discussions suggest that the HP is used to increase the dramatic impact of the story by making the audience feel as if it had been present at the time of the actual experience, seeing events as they actually happened. Others suggest that the speaker becomes so involved in the telling of the story that he narrates events as if they were being relived, and as if they were occurring simultaneously with their retelling.

These descriptions all assume that the HP makes the past more vivid because it moves past events out of their original time frame and into the moment of speaking. Past events 'come alive' with the HP because it is formally equivalent to a tense which indicates events whose reference time is not the moment of the experience, but the moment of speaking. However, since the present tense can indicate a variety of reference times, many linguists have concluded that it is timeless (Twaddell 1960) or semantically unmarked (Lyons 1977), whereas others have concluded that its reference time normally INCLUDES the moment of speaking within a longer temporal span (Jespersen 1931, Palmer 1965).

Wolfson 1979 points out that, if the present tense has no semantic component, the argument that the HP has a dramatic effect loses much of its force. She argues instead that the HP works jointly with the P as a discourse feature, with the two tenses alternating in narrative to 'structure the experience from the point of view of the speaker and to dramatize it' (p. 216). The direction of the tense switch is said to be irrelevant: a switch either from P to HP or from HP to P organizes the story into chronological segments (1979:174) and focuses on events seen by the narrator as most important (1978:222). Thus Wolfson's conclusions are a radical break with traditional understandings of the HP: which analysis is correct?

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line. An exception is with verbs of saying and direct quotes: because a direct quote forms one complicating action clause, the letter indicates the entire quote; but because of the length of the quote, it may continue for several lines.

[2] The second clause in 1e is not a possible environment for the HP, as later discussion will elaborate.

Solutions to such controversies can typically be found through quantitative analysis. The qualitative arguments associated with each position present plausible justifications which 'can oscillate interminably between two scholastic positions. But quantitative studies greatly enrich the data and allow us to resolve the question by seeing just how speakers themselves deal with it' (Labov 1975:26). Although Wolfson's analysis is an important step in this direction, it does not cover the full range of HP–P variation, and therefore misses some distinctions concerning both the nature of the variation and constraints on its occurrence.[3]

In this paper I use data from 73 narratives to address three issues around which disagreement is centered: constraints on the HP–P variation, the function of the HP in narrative, and the reasons for the significance of the HP. Since this paper concerns the use of the HP WITHIN narrative (rather than the reason why some narratives contain the HP whereas others do not), I have worked only with performed narratives (Hymes 1974)—those most likely to contain at least one occurrence of the HP (cf. Wolfson 1978). Out of 1288 narrative clauses within these 73 narratives, 30% of the verbs are in the HP.

1. USING THE PRESENT TO DESCRIBE THE PAST. We can use our knowledge of narrative structure to state precisely where the present tense can be used to describe the past.[4] Narratives are oral versions of experience in which events are relayed in the order in which they presumably occurred. Their defining characteristic is a relationship of TEMPORAL JUNCTURE between at least two clauses: if a change in the order of the two clauses results in a change in the interpretation of what actually happened, then those two clauses are NARRATIVE CLAUSES, and the events reported are NARRATIVE EVENTS (Labov 1972, Labov & Waletzky 1967). The clauses in a narrative differ in the sort of information which they contribute to the story, and in their relation to the temporal framework of the story, as in the following narrative:

(2) Oh it was so crazy — ABSTRACT
I remember this.
Maybe I shouldn't say it now.
It was really a weird thing.
We were at camp
and we did this crazy thing.
We were all going out for lunch — ORIENTATION
it was our birthdays
and we were C.I.T.'s
so we were allowed to.
a. We borrowed someone's car — COMPLICATING ACTION
b. and we got BLOWN out.

[3] Wolfson does not use quantitative evidence to examine the direction of tense-switching or to substantiate her conclusion that the HP lacks dramatic significance. The present study examines both of these problems by comparing frequencies of occurrence (e.g. of P verbs compared to HP verbs) with statistical tests of significance. A chi-square with a probability of .05 or less is considered statistically significant, indicating that the relationship would occur by chance only 5% of the time. More data would make a variable rule analysis useful for separating multivariate relationships.

[4] The discussion closely follows Labov 1972, Labov & Waletzky 1967.

c. And w– so, the car stalled
d. but we didn't ca- COULDn't call
because we were supposed t' be out t' lunch — EMBEDDED ORIENTATION
and why were we HERE?
Cause we had moved ... off the road t' party.
So we were in this car
in this– an' we were in Allentown
it's real dinky
an' it's like real hick town off o' Allentown,
right around there in this factory.
e. We just pulled into this lot — COMPLICATING ACTION
it was just in this lot — EMBEDDED ORIENTATION
f. and all of a sudden the buzzer sounds — COMPLICATING ACTION
g. and all these guys hh come hh out
h. and we didn't know what t' do
cause we were stuck.
i. So we asked some guy
t' come over an' HELP us.
j. So he opens the car
k. and everyone gets out except me and my girlfriend.
We were in the front — EMBEDDED ORIENTATION
we just didn't feel like getting out.
l. And all of a sudden all these sparks — COMPLICATING ACTION
start t' fly.
m. So the girl says,
'Look, do you know what you're doing?
Because y' know um ... this is not my car
an' if you don't know what you're doing,
just don't DO anything.'
n. And he says,
'Yeh, I have t' do it from inside.'
o. And all of a sudden he gets in the car,
p. sits down,
q. and starts t' turn on the motor.
We thought he was taking off with us. — EVALUATION
We really thought– h– he was–
he was like real– with all tattoos and smelled–
an' we thought that was it! hhh
r. But he got out hhh after awhile. — COMPLICATING ACTION
I really thought I was gonna die — EVALUATION
or be taken someplace FAR away.
It was so crazy,
because we couldn't call anybody.
It was really funny.

Narrative 2 is opened by an ABSTRACT which summarizes the experience, and presents general propositions which the narrative will expand. Next, ORIENTATION CLAUSES describe background information—e.g. the time and place of the events, and the identities of the characters. Clauses a–r are COMPLICATING ACTION CLAUSES. The complicating action is the section that tells the story by relaying a series of temporally-ordered narrative events.

Note that orientation clauses can be EMBEDDED in the complicating action to add information which the hearer needs in order to understand, or interpret the significance of, adjacently reported events. When added information indicates the value of those events in relation to the point of the story, embedded

orientation clauses gain an EVALUATIVE function, as they do in Narrative 2. This narrative also contains EXTERNAL EVALUATION CLAUSES (after q and r) which comment on and interpret events for the audience from a perspective outside the narrative action. Finally, narratives are optionally closed with a CODA which ends the story and returns the listener to the present.[5]

Consider next how clauses in a narrative are related to the temporal framework of the story. Orientation clauses usually report existing states (e.g. *we were C.I.T.'s*) and extended processes (e.g. *we were all going out for lunch*) which may begin before the narrative action itself, and continue during that action. Orientation clauses, then, are not usually understood as temporally ordered. If they were reshuffled among themselves, our understanding of the background material would not change; if they were relocated in the narrative, our interpretation of the order of narrative events would not change.

However, each complicating action clause describes an event—a discrete occurrence in time—which is understood to follow the event immediately preceding it, and to precede the event immediately following it. Other clauses in the complicating action report more extended events and have a temporal domain which is restricted to a specific scene or episode:

(3) And Mrs. Katz freaked out today
because I had t' give her a reinstatement card
and YOU know Mrs. Katz.
She– I had– I had t' get her t' sign the card
t. and she looked at it
u. and she goes ...
'Sandy! Sandy!' hhhh
v. she was sayin'–
an' Sherry an' Karen an' Lynn in the front row
w. they're all sittin' up there hysterically laughing, ←
'cause this is like a very novel thing,
for me t' get suspended.

RESTRICTED CLAUSES are also a part of the complicating action; but they differ from narrative clauses, in that they can be moved within a restricted area of the narrative without changing our interpretation of what had occurred.

Clauses in a narrative also differ in terms of their REFERENCE TIME—a point established in relation to the time of speaking—and their EVENT TIME—a point established in relation to other events.[6] The reference time of events reported in complicating action clauses is understood to be PRIOR to the speaking time; this is often established by a temporal adverb at the beginning of the narrative,

[5] Examples are *It's in the cellar right now*; *Now they don't bother us no more*. Labov & Fanshel (1977:109) note that speakers often have trouble ending narratives because an unlimited number of events may have followed those being reported.

[6] My use of the terms REFERENCE TIME and EVENT TIME follows Reichenbach 1947, who argues that temporal specification requires three notions of time—the third being SPEECH TIME. In her application of Reichenbach's system to English tense and temporal adverbs, Smith 1978 concludes that the domain of temporal specification is larger than a sentence—that a temporal expression in one sentence may contribute to the interpretation of another. How a narrative establishes a reference time and event time is suggested in the present paper, but the details for other fields of discourse remain to be worked out.

and by the orientation clauses. In contrast, the reference time of states and processes reported in orientation clauses is not always prior to the speaking time, as illustrated in the initial and embedded orientation clauses in examples 4–5 respectively:

(4) I'll never forget it.
Hospitals are usually empty, ←
no doctors around y' know.
Most of them are all out. ←
And my doctor was Dr. uh McGee.
He's at Broad and Elm. ←

(5) k. And ... uh ... they took him in.
Now if you're from– if you're from Philadelphia, ←
you have t' pay a whole fine. ←
If you're from Jersey, ←
you only have t' pay, like twenty-five dollars. ←
So, they were from Philly ...
l. And they had t' pay, like, a two hundred dollar fine.

A similar range of reference times is available for the evaluative material in external evaluation clauses:

(6) j. and he had to give me a tranquilizer
t-t-t' sedate me enough
to get me on the train,
to get to his house,
go to bed,
and y' know be able to string myself together for the next day.
And it's just one of those things ←
that I still haven't really recovered from
because I've– y' know– I've had grandmothers die and stuff, ←
but you sorta expect that y' know sort of ... ←
you grow up from when you're a little girl ←
and you know that they're old ←
and you know that old people die. ←

Note, then, that the present tense in examples 4–6 indicates a range of reference times, e.g. those associated with habitual occurrences, general truths, the time of speaking. This is in sharp contrast to complicating action clauses, where the only reference time is prior to the moment of speaking, and the present tense refers only to past time.

Narratives also provide an understanding of when each event occurs in relation to other events. Because complicating action clauses are ordered by temporal juncture, their event time is fixed: each event is understood to have occurred after the one preceding it, and before the one following it. And because restricted clauses are limited to a certain scene or episode, their event time is also fixed: each extended event is understood to overlap with the events in adjacent clauses.[7]

[7] Many restricted clauses contain progressive verbs. Jakobson 1957 has stated that, in contrast to tense (which is a shifter), aspect is a connector: it relates one narrative event to another. The progressive, then, connects an extended event to other events because it indicates that they all overlap in time. It is this limited overlap which is crucial for restricted clauses. Other restricted clauses contain stative verbs, describing states which the speaker did not know existed until a point of discovery, but which continue to exist—and thus overlap with—events occurring after that point.

The event time of what is reported in orientation and evaluation clauses, however, is much more variable: thus the evaluation clauses in 6 describe general truths, assumed to hold before and after the narrated experience. It is only events reported within the complicating action which have an event time that is firmly established by the place of the clause in the surrounding discourse—either by temporal juncture, or by restriction to a particular group of adjacent clauses.

Consider, then, where the HP occurs in narrative. First, the HP never occurs in external evaluation clauses, abstracts, or codas. Second, in orientation clauses, only 3% (9/268) of the verbs in my data are in the HP. In complicating action clauses, however, 30% (381/1288) of the verbs are in the HP.

The almost total restriction of the HP to complicating action clauses is not surprising. It is only here that tense is freed from its main job of providing a reference time: events can be understood as having occurred prior to the moment of speaking, with or without the past-tense form. In addition, narrative events are understood as having an event time because of their order in the discourse: they are temporally ordered, or limited to specific scenes or episodes, so that they can be understood to have occurred after previous events, and before upcoming events. In short, a specific understanding of the parameters of events within the temporal framework of the narrative is available through the discourse.[8] Because this understanding is provided only within the complicating action (the section which relays the experience), the HP–P variation is confined almost exclusively to the narrative and restricted clauses in this section of the narrative.

2. TENSE-SWITCHING: MAKING A SCENE. Consider the HP–P variation within the complicating action. The most typical pattern is one in which the complicating action begins with past-tense verbs, switches after a few clauses to the HP, possibly switches between the HP and the P a few more times, and then concludes with past-tense verbs. The tendency to begin and end the complicating action with the P is indicated by the fact that, in my corpus, the HP is used with 18% of the verbs in the initial complicating action clause, 9% in the final clause, but 32% in the middle clauses.

Note next that there is a tendency for verbs in the same tense to cluster together. Both HP and P verbs are more frequent when the PRIOR verb is in the same tense: in non-initial complicating action clauses, 62% of the 368 HP verbs occur after an HP verb in the prior clause, and 82% of the 847 P verbs follow a P verb in the prior clause. Thus sequences with rapid alternation between the HP and the P are not typical.

The extreme end of this clustering tendency is a narrative told entirely in one tense. Narratives told entirely in the HP are rare, however: they are usually

[8] Kiparsky (1968:33) has argued that the historical present in Indo-European is a neutralization of an underlying past tense. Despite differences in terminology, the motivation for the argument here is similar: preterit verbs are not needed to establish that the narrative has a reference time prior to the speaking time. Thus the referential distinction between the past and the present is 'neutralized'. It is interesting that the usual mode of temporal reference in pidgin languages (where verbs are unmarked for tense) is the use of temporal adverbs, an operation whose similarity to Indo-European processes is pointed out in Day 1973.

brief, with reference times clearly established as prior to the speaking time. This suggests an upper limit on the number of events for which a reference time can be understood to hold, without a past-tense marker to re-establish that reference time.

Similar findings are the basis of different conclusions in Wolfson 1979. Thus, finding no narratives told entirely in the HP, she concludes that it is not the HP per se which is a dramatic device in narrative, but the SWITCH. The tendency for verbs in one tense to cluster together is given a functional, discourse-level explanation: maintenance of one tense groups events into one scene or episode, while switching separates events from one another. We can test these more specific hypotheses about tense-switching in several ways.

First, examine the environments in which one tense is maintained. Wolfson (1979:174) reports that, in sentences with subordinate *when*-clauses, 'it is almost always the case that the past tense is used both in the *when*-clause and in the head clause.' *When*-clauses do not contain HP verbs because they are similar to clauses in the introductory portions of narrative which provide background material for events to follow (orientation clauses), in which the HP does not usually occur. The lack of tense-switching between subordinate and dominant clauses results from the fact that these clauses represent a single event (Wolfson 1979:175).

My data on subordinate temporal clauses (headed by either *when* or *as*) support Wolfson's findings about the restriction against the HP in the subordinate clause, but they suggest a slight reformulation of the constraint against tense-switching. In 18/19 of the narrative clauses with subordinate temporal clauses, both verbs are in the past tense (the one exception is in a narrative told entirely in the HP). Note, however, that if we take temporal juncture as the defining criterion for a narrative event, a subordinate clause is NOT a separate narrative clause: it can either precede or follow the main clause without changing our interpretation of what occurred. Thus, as Wolfson suggests, there IS one narrative event reported, in the main clause; and the material in the subordinate clause adds background information within the same temporal slot. But as we have already seen, a lack of temporal ordering between clauses inhibits the HP and therefore inhibits tense-switching. Thus we might say that the reason tense does not switch between main and subordinate *when*-clauses is not because they represent a single event, but because they report material which is not sequentially ordered.

Wolfson 1979 also finds that tense does not switch in coördinate clauses, with the same reason for the restriction: since tense-switching separates events, it does not occur in structures which represent a single event. Although Wolfson refers only to coördinate clauses, examples in her data include both coördination of full clauses and coördination of verb phrases (or reduced clauses).[9] However,

[9] Alternative frameworks treat sentences with conjoined verbs as the result of a Conjunction Reduction transformation, operating on two underlying clauses. The fact that tense is switched so rarely in these clauses suggests that their analysis as one clause, with one auxiliary, is more accurate (and certainly simpler) than an analysis requiring a condition that the two (or more) auxiliaries be equal.

as Table 1 shows, the difference in my data between conjoined verbs and conjoined clauses is crucial.

	VERBAL CONJUNCTION	CLAUSAL CONJUNCTION	TOTAL
Switch	3 (4%)	109 (22%)	112
Retain	77	384	461
Total	80	493	573

TABLE 1. ($\chi^2 = 14.76$, $p < .001$.)

This table shows that tense switches in conjoined clauses, but not in conjoined verbs. Why is this true? Examine, first, conjoined verbs: perhaps tense-switching is restricted in such structures for the functional reasons suggested by Wolfson. Consider these examples:

(7) f. But he hit the trolley car,
g. and bounced off
h. and turned around
i. and went over on the other side.

(8) h. And little Sean turns around
i. and spits on me.

(9) l. So she turned around,
m. she said to me,
'Oh that was me.'

(10) bb. So she got the angel
cc. and put it on my pavement.
dd. And I got the angel
ee. and I throw it after her.
ff. So then she starts.
gg. She walks down to her house,
hh. stands on her doorstep.

(11) k. Then my father came runnin' up.
l. He got me
m. he threw me to my mother.

These examples illustrate some of the difficulties that must be resolved before we can say that conjunction unites acts into one event. In 7, the four actions seem to have occurred almost simultaneously; but by a criterion of temporal juncture, they still do not form one event, since switching their order would change the interpretation of what had occurred. In 8, *turn around* might be argued to represent an act which gains relevance only when the second act (*spit*) occurs. But, as 9 shows, *turn around* also occurs in unconjoined structures: does it indicate more of an event there? In 10, *get* and *walk* represent prerequisite actions for *put* and *stand* respectively. But such dependencies can also be found in unconjoined structures, as in 11: does their event status then change?

These examples illustrate our need for a clearer understanding of what an event is, and of the differences between different forms of conjunction—of when verbal conjunction is an alternative to clausal conjunction, and when it is something different—before we can conclude that tense does not switch in verbal conjuncts because they represent acts which combine to form one event.

How can we explain, then, the constraint against tense-switching in verbal

conjuncts? Since tense is switched more frequently in clausal conjuncts, we can start by considering some differences between these two forms of conjunction. First, verbal conjuncts are routinely modified by one aspect marker, or by one modal. This is not possible in clausal conjuncts, as seen in a comparison of 12–13 with their corresponding clausal conjuncts:

(12) I was screaming and hollering.
(13) I knew I should pick up the phone and tell her I was okay.

In addition, a change in aspect or modality is more marked in verbal conjuncts than in clausal conjuncts. I found only one such occurrence:

(14) Men were out drinking in their car and said ...

Note, also, that one adverb can have scope over both verbal conjuncts, but not over both clausal conjuncts:

(15) He suddenly turned around and punched me.
(16) He suddenly turned around and he punched me.

Finally, when we examine conjunction and tense in discourse other than narratives, we see that a change from one tense to another is much more restricted with verbal conjunction than with clausal conjunction. Ex. 17 shows that a change in tense is possible with verbal conjunction under very restricted semantic conditions: here the first verb represents an act completed prior to the inception of the second act, which continues to the moment of speaking. Ex. 18 shows that a change in tense in conjoined clauses can occur under less restricted conditions:

(17) He further learns in talking with a 'motley' Russian
(transformed by Mr. Coppola into an eccentric freelance
photographer played by Dennis Hopper)
that Kurtz achieved and preserves his position through ←
'unsound methods'. (Tessitore 1979)

(18) And I'm making a living
and I supported my family, ←
and I've been happy at it. ←

All these considerations suggest one conclusion: the tendency for verbs in one tense to cluster in narrative is intensified in verbal conjuncts because maintaining one tense forms part of a more general set of syntactic and semantic restrictions on such structures.

Note that the differences between conjoined verbs and conjoined clauses give us reason to EXPECT tense to switch more frequently in conjoined clauses—and in fact, this is what Table 1 showed. Yet Wolfson (1979:175–8) reports that tense does not switch in coördinate clauses. The only exception to Wolfson's constraint is when the verb in the second conjunct is a verb of saying. However, out of the 109 verbs in the present data which switch tense when they are in the second conjunct of a coördinate clause, only 38 are verbs of saying; this leaves 71 other verbs which also switch tense in this environment.

If we isolate those cases in which the clausal conjuncts are more closely linked by other criteria, tense still switches: in the 246 coördinate clauses with coreferential subjects, 21% contain a tense-switch, compared to the 247 with different subjects in which 23% contain a tense-switch ($\chi^2 = .27$, $p < .70$). And when we compare clausal conjuncts which form one sentence (by prosodic criteria) with those forming separate sentences, we find tense-switching in 19%

of the 218 cases of coördination within one prosodically-defined sentence, compared to 24% of the 275 cases of coördination across prosodically-defined sentence boundaries ($\chi^2 = 1.92$, p. $< .20$).[10]

The discrepancy between Wolfson's 1979 results and those of the present data, then, is inexplicable. Coördination between clauses does not have an inhibiting effect on tense-switching: it is only verbal conjunction which restricts tense-switching, and this restriction does not seem to depend on discourse function. Furthermore, when coördinate clauses in my corpus are compared to clauses with no conjunctions and to clauses with temporal conjunctions, they behave almost exactly like the former junctions,[11] as shown in Table 2.

	NO CONJUNCTION	COORDINATE CONJUNCTION	TEMPORAL CONJUNCTION	TOTAL
Switch	92 (24%)	109 (22%)	82 (32%)	283
Retain	293	384	175	852
Total	385	493	257	1135

TABLE 2. ($\chi^2 = 9.02$, $p < .02$.)

Thus it is only in comparison to temporal conjunctions that coördinate conjunctions restrict tense-switching; but this restriction is no stronger than that found with unconjoined clauses.

Why should temporal conjunctions favor tense-switching? First, they emphasize the temporal asymmetry of narrative clauses. Second, they often indicate something beyond conjunction—e.g. result or consequence. Third, the subject of a clause is more likely to differ from that of the prior clause if it is preceded by a temporal conjunction. In 67% of the 257 clauses initiated by temporal conjunctions, the subject changes from that of the prior clause; compare this to 50% of the 493 clauses initiated by coördinate conjunctions, and 43% of the 385 unconjoined clauses ($\chi^2 = 36.36$, $p < .001$).

These properties are independent evidence that temporal conjunctions occur when there is some break between events, and suggest that they function to separate events from one another. Thus the fact that tense switches more frequently with these conjunctions supports Wolfson's hypothesis that tense-switching separates events.

However, this does not mean that maintaining one tense has the opposite function—that of uniting acts into one event. Rather, there seems to be a general tendency for particular grammatical forms to cluster together. Thus Weiner & Labov 1977 find that the probability of using a passive increases if a passive

[10] A falling intonation contour, along with a relatively longer pause, indicates a sentence-final boundary.

[11] Two points: First, although a number of different temporal conjunctions are being considered together, this is warranted by their fairly uniform behavior in relation to tense-switching and by the relative infrequency of some. However, since *so* accounts for ⅔ of the temporal conjunctions, the following discussion could be taken as most representative of *so*. Also, combinations of conjunctions are possible: *and so, then all of a sudden*. When coördinate and temporal conjunctions are combined, I count them only as tokens of the latter.

Second, the total number of cases in Table 2 is 1135: the 1288 narrative clauses, minus conjoined verbs (excluded because the almost categorical absence of tense-switching would have distorted the effects of other constraints) and minus initial narrative clauses (not relevant to our hypotheses).

has already occurred in the preceding discourse. And Sankoff & Laberge 1978 report for French that, when *on* and *tu/vous* occur in a sequence of conjoined or juxtaposed sentences, their switch rate is lower than their over-all proportions. Such sequence constraints suggest that what influences the first occurrence of a form need not be the same as what influences subsequent occurrences. It is perfectly possible that tense-switching functions in discourse to separate events, but that staying in one tense does not have a comparable discourse function. Rather, the latter may result from a more mechanical constraint on continuing with one form unless there is reason to change—which, as we have seen, can be intensified within a phrasal unit such as conjoined verbs.

Recall that another aspect of Wolfson's hypothesis is that the HP–P switch operates in both directions. We can easily test this by examining the clauses in our own data where P from the prior clause has switched to HP or vice versa. If the direction of tense-switching does not matter, then we would find it more often (regardless of direction) in clauses initiated by temporal conjunctions. Compare, then, Table 3, which shows the percentage of cases in which P switched to HP, and Table 4, which shows the percentage of cases in which HP switched to P.

	NO TEMPORAL CONJUNCTION	TEMPORAL CONJUNCTION	TOTAL
P to HP	101 (17%)	36 (20%)	137
P to P	489	143	632
Total	590	179	769

TABLE 3. (χ^2 = .09, $p < .80$.)

	NO TEMPORAL CONJUNCTION	TEMPORAL CONJUNCTION	TOTAL
HP to P	100 (35%)	46 (59%)	146
HP to HP	188	32	220
Total	288	78	366

TABLE 4. (χ^2 = 15.06, $p < .001$.)

These tables present striking evidence that the direction of the tense-switch DOES matter. Table 3 shows that the presence or absence of temporal conjunctions has no influence on whether tense will switch from P to HP, rather than stay in P. In contrast, Table 4 shows that switching from HP to P is more frequent than staying in P when clauses are introduced by temporal conjunctions. It is hardly the case, then, that the direction of the tense-switch does not matter: it is only when tense switches from HP to P that it separates events in the narrative.[12]

[12] Evidence for the same conclusion is the relationship between switching and the subject of the clause: when the subject is different from that of the prior clause, tense is more likely to switch from HP to P, but not from P to HP. But this holds only in clauses which are NOT conjoined—which suggests that the first element of the clause has a stronger influence on tense-switching: when conjunctions are present, they are first, but when no conjunctions are present, the subject noun phrase is first.

If switching out of the HP prefaces a new event, why bother to switch into the HP in the first place? It hardly makes sense to switch into the HP JUST to switch out of it several clauses later. In answering this question, it is helpful to return to traditional understandings about the function of the HP in narrative.

3. THE HISTORICAL PRESENT: GETTING TO THE POINT. Traditional explanations of the HP view it as the past-more-vivid. However, the variety of reference points of the present tense can present a challenge to analyses which derive the efficacy of the HP from its formal equivalence with a tense which is assumed to have a reference time simultaneous with the moment of speaking.

When we examine where the HP occurs, we see that it is more common in environments where the present tense typically has a present-time understanding. Let us first examine action verbs. Verbs describing actions (*push, run, walk, scream*) whose reference time includes the moment of speaking typically occur in the progressive form. The non-progressive form of action verbs, however, describes habitual activities, as is indicated by a comparison of the preferred readings for the following:

(19) I am sitting at a desk and writing.
(20) I sit at a desk and write.

Action verbs in narrative often occur in the progressive form in restricted clauses—resulting in complicating action clauses whose event time is limited to an overlap with a few adjacent clauses. Table 5 shows that progressive forms of action verbs in restrictive clauses are in the HP more often than non-progressive forms.

	PROGRESSIVE	NON-PROGRESSIVE	TOTAL
HP	36 (49%)	80 (11%)	116
P	37	631	668
Total	73	711	784

TABLE 5. ($\chi^2 = 76.1$, $p < .001$.)

Thus, even when actions reported in the present tense have a reference time PRIOR to the time of speaking, the progressive form co-occurs with the present tense. Because of the usual meaning of present-tense action verbs in the progressive, then, the co-occurrence of the HP with the progressive is a way of making a past event sound as if it were occurring at the moment of speaking—a way of making it more vivid.

Consider another way in which the HP mirrors the use of the present tense when it is used to refer to present events. Recall that most HP verbs occur in clusters. Other speech events exist in which a series of temporally-ordered events is described with a sequence of present-tense verbs, e.g. sports commentaries, demonstrations of cooking techniques, advertised products, and magical tricks (Leech, 2–3; Palmer, 82–3). This 'instantaneous' use of the present tense indicates events whose reference time is simultaneous with the present tense. Thus using the present tense in narrative to describe a cluster of temporally-ordered past events is another way in which the present tense is used to refer to past events.

Since the HP is used in some of the same ways as the present tense to refer to present events, the fact that the present tense also refers to events with other reference times has little bearing on the analysis of the HP. But what is important is that we now have a basis from which to confirm that the HP makes the past more vivid by bringing past events into the moment of speaking, regardless of our analysis of the present tense in its other uses.

Recognizing that the HP is a use of the present tense allows us to explain one of its more perplexing uses—with verbs of saying and direct quotes (Wolfson 1979:178–9). Direct quotes are frequent in narrative: they increase the immediacy of an utterance which occurred in the past by allowing the speaker to perform that talk in its original form, as if it were occurring at the present moment (Hymes 1977, Wolfson 1978). It is through a combination of deictic and structural changes that direct quotes have this effect: the narrative framework replaces the situation of speaking as the central reference point—becoming the locus for time, place, and person indicators, as well as the arena within which speech acts are performed. Because indirect reports of past utterances do not involve the same deictic and structural changes, the same effect of immediacy is not created.

Note, now, that a verb of saying (along with a reference to the original speaker) usually precedes quoted material. Using the present tense with that verb is another way in which the narrative framework replaces the situation of speaking in order to make the reported material more immediate. Thus we would expect the HP to be more frequent in our data with direct than indirect quotes, and this is just what Table 6 shows.

	DIRECT QUOTE	INDIRECT QUOTE	TOTAL
HP	227 (63%)	3 (5%)	230
P	131	52	183
Total	358	55	413

TABLE 6. ($\chi^2 = 64.89$, $p < .001$.)

Consider, next, different verbs of saying. Most such verbs, e.g. *say, tell, yell*, can preface either direct or indirect quotes. But the verb *go* can be used as a verb of saying only with direct quotes: cf. *He goes, 'I saw her!'* to **He goes that he saw her.* Table 7 shows that when we compare *go* to other verbs of saying (represented by *say*, the most frequent and semantically neutral of the group), the HP is much more frequent with *go*.

	say	*go*	TOTAL
HP	192 (60%)	35 (97%)	227
P	130	1	131
Total	322	36	358

TABLE 7. ($\chi^2 = 19.72$, $p < .001$.)

Since *go* is limited to direct quotes—to reporting utterances as if they were occurring at the present moment—it is also likely to occur in a tense which has the same function.

Return, now, to consider the evaluation of narratives. Narratives are often told to illustrate general propositions and to establish a central affective point (Labov & Fanshel). Evaluation clauses which are EXTERNAL to the narrative action may be used to indicate the point of the story to the audience; but, if narrative events convey their own importance, and make obvious contributions to the point of the story, then we can say that the evaluation is INTERNAL. The HP is an INTERNAL EVALUATION DEVICE: it allows the narrator to present events as if they were occurring at that moment, so that the audience can hear for itself what happened, and can interpret for itself the significance of those events for the experience.

Note next that the progressive is also an internal evaluation device. The progressive is a CORRELATIVE: it highlights and evaluates an event by aligning it with other events which occurred at the same time (Labov 1972:387). In addition, because the progressive indicates an event which is continuous and more extended in time, it momentarily breaks the sequence of action which 'calls attention to that part of the narrative and indicates to the listener that this has some connection with the evaluative point' (Labov 1972:374). Thus, in a story about fear, a cluster of progressive verbs occurs at the high point of the account—when the speaker discovers that the man in her bedroom is NOT her husband:

(21) z. *So I felt him lean over the bed.*
aa. And I– I start laughin'.
bb. I says,
'Oh you s–' excuse the expression
cc. I said,
'Oh you son of a bitch,' right,
dd. And he came,
ee. he kissed me.
When he kissed me
ff. I felt his beard.
gg. And I'm pushin' ←
hh. I'm saying', ←
'Ooh, my God! It isn't you!'
ii. And I'm pushin' with all my might, right? ←
jj. I'm saying, ←
'Oh my God! Who is he?' y' know.
kk. And I PUSH.
ll. And I'm– uh– uh I try to scream
mm. and I was too scared.

Thus the HP–progressive relationship is not only supported by the English tense and aspect system, but there are also functional reasons why the two frequently co-occur.

Consider, also, how the content of a direct quote can provide an internal evaluation for the narrative. In 22, a direct quote provides the evaluation in a narrative in which a middle-aged woman is angered by her middle-aged married neighbor, who increased the volume on her radio so that a young male house painter could hear the music:

(22) w. and I'm saying to myself,
'But there's a married woman over there.

Why should she do this for convenience for him?
Did she like the guy or something?
What's she got, a crush, or something?
And I gotta suffer for the crush she's got on him.'

Thus direct quotes allow the narrator to convey the point of the narrative through the exact words of someone present during the experience itself, so that the audience can appreciate for itself the authenticity of the evaluation. The HP makes the reported material—and the evaluation which it contains—even more immediate and more authentic.

Given the evidence that the HP is an internal evaluation device, how can we account for Wolfson's (1979:172) observation that 'much of the important action is recounted in the past tense ... [and that] many stories are so organized that what seems to be the most important event is given in the past tense'? Consider, briefly, some of the ways in which the point of a narrative can emerge from the plot. The narrative may be organized as a series of events whose progression toward the resolution mounts in intensity, so that the point of the story is available from the text in straightforward ways.[13] Example 23 illustrates a predictable use of the HP in this type of story:

(23) a. Then my grandfather come over[14]
b. and he says, 'Let's–'
cause they saw a little rat–
they saw a rat run across the room,
my moth– my grandfather and my father was in there.
c. And my grandfather says,
'Now I'm gonna stick the broom under the couch.
I'm gonna pull it out and you start hitting–'
d. He's tellin' my father,
'Youse start hitting the rat with the hammer.
You squash him. Right?'
e. He stuck the broom under,
f. he pulled it out,
g. and this black thing flies out. ←
h. And my father's beating it.
i. Here, that was only a sto– sock!

Often, however, the relationship between the point of the story and the HP is more subtle: the point is embedded in the text in less obvious ways. Consider, for example, the use of the HP in three parallel stories told by one speaker. Each story made the point that a mother has privileged knowledge about the care and welfare of her children, by describing an experience in which the mother's resolution of a problem was more successful than the attempts of an outsider. In each story, the climactic event is the same—the mother discovers her child in need of help—and the resolution is the same: the mother takes

[13] Members of the 1979 Linguistics 560 class report more occurrences of the HP in the climax of a narrative (defined intuitively) and in the build-up to the climax (one-quarter of all preceding clauses) than in the clauses either preceding the build-up or following the climax. This is exactly the pattern of HP use which we would expect in such stories. I thank the class and Anthony Kroch for making this observation available to me.

[14] *Come* with 3sg. subjects is a dialect variant of *came*, rather than an instance of the HP.

heroic action to avert catastrophe. Given these parallels, we might expect the HP to be used in the same way in all three stories; and in fact, in two of the stories the HP occurs both at the point of climax and at the time of resolution. The third story is a puzzle, however: rather than the HP, external evaluation clauses are used. Why aren't HP verbs used in all three stories?

Note, crucially, that in the two stories which use the HP for evaluation, the speaker's OWN competence as a mother is being attested; in the third story, by contrast, it is her mother's competence which is being attested. The speaker is extremely concerned about her public image as a good mother: she is frequently involved in neighborhood confrontations in which her competence as a mother is challenged, and in which she challenges others' performance of that role.[15] In these narratives, then, just looking for the HP to occur at the most dramatic point would have missed the subleties involved in its use as an evaluative device. Important events may be highlighted by other evaluative devices; but in addition, because a story may make a point on several different levels, we may have to search further to find that point, and to find the ways in which the speaker allows its more subtle aspects to emerge from the narrative.

4. CONCLUSION. This paper has compared alternative hypotheses about tense variation in narrative by combining quantitative methods for analysing variation with qualitative understandings of the organization of narrative. At first, the historical-present tense may seem to be a simple replacement of the past tense in stories—a mere stylistic device. However, by considering areas of fundamental linguistic concern and complexity with a methodology which combines quantitative precision and qualitative description, the historical present can be seen as one of the grammatical resources which speakers use to represent their experiences in narrative.

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[15] Anne Bower has provided many useful insights about this speaker, based on her fieldwork and on extensive knowledge of the community of which this speaker was a member.

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[Received 28 February 1980.]