Acquisition of L2 Written Narrative Competence: Tense-Switching by Russian L2 Speakers of German*

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Abstract: The present study examines how foreground and background is marked in L1 Russian and L1 German, to test the hypothesis that L1 speakers of Russian writing in German as L2 will use tense-switching to differentiate foreground and background. Results suggest that Russian-speaking writers used grammatical aspect while German-speaking writers employed inherent properties of the verbal predicate to mark foreground and background. The L2 data revealed a more mixed pattern: one third of the Russian-speaking L2 speakers of German used L1 Russian pattern, switching between different tenses to mark foreground and background; another third of the Russian-speaking L2 users of German were comparable to L1 German speakers; and a third group of the Russian-speaking L2 users of German wrote their texts in the present tense. These results indicate that switching between foreground and background, as a critical property of proficient narrative discourse, constitutes a long-lasting challenge in learning a second language.

1. Introduction

Being able to produce a coherent, well-organized text is essential for successful communication in general and for constructing narrative discourse in particular. Narrative proficiency enables speaker-writers to link different elements of a story, to highlight some and downgrade others, an ability which takes a long time to develop. Little is known about the acquisition of narrative discourse abilities in L2, although this is clearly part of becoming a proficient second-language speaker-writer.

Linguists generally agree that narrative discourse in different languages follows a common principle of information organization: the so-called grounding principle of alternation between foreground and background (e.g., Fleischman 1985, Hopper 1979, 1982, van Kuppevelt 1995, Labov and Waletzky 1967, Reinhart 1984, von Stutterheim and Klein 2002). Languages use various linguistic devices to mark foreground and background. Some make use of word order (Hopper 1979 for Old English) or voice (Hopper 1979 for Malay and Tagalog), while others employ tense-aspect morphology, as shown by Hopper (1979) for French and Russian and by Fleischman (1985) for Old French. Several studies have demonstrated that tense-aspect switching is a key mechanism for the differentiation between foreground and background in oral texts (Flashner 1989, Fludernik 1991, Hopper 1979, 1982, Schiffrin 1981). On the other hand, relatively little research is available on foreground-background alternations in written texts, exceptions being Chvany's (1984) analysis of stories by Tolstoy and Chekhov and Fleischman's (1985) study of medieval French epic texts.

The goal of the present study is to fill lacunae in the literature dealing with tense-aspect switching as a means for expressing foreground-background distinctions by examining non-literary texts written by non-native speaker-writers compared with their native-speaking peers. To this end, we analyze tense-aspect switching in a large corpus of written texts elicited from a group of advanced-level learners of German as L2, compared with corresponding texts elicited from native speakers of German and of Russian, respectively.

The paper begins by reviewing relevant background research in section 2. Section 3 gives an outline of the conceptual frame of reference underlying the study, including a brief discussion of temporality and how tense and aspect are encoded in German and Russian, as the

two languages investigated. Section 4 sets forth the formulation of predictions. Section 5 describes the study, followed by the results for L1 and L2 populations in sections 6 and 7, respectively. Section 8 discusses our findings, and section 9 concludes this paper.

2. Background Research

We include some work that has been done on spoken narratives and literary texts because there are not many studies addressing the relationship between tense-aspect switching and the grounding principle in written discourse.

2.1. Switching between Foreground and Background by L1 Speakers

Hopper (1970) was among the first in the West to discuss the correlation between the use of grammatical aspect and the distribution of information structure in Russian, following Forsyth (1970: 9–11). In his analysis Hopper showed that the imperfective aspect is chosen when no new event is selected, while the perfective aspect is used for the introduction of new events. He concluded that the use of grammatical aspect in Russian is linked to the distinction between foreground and background structures. Chvany (1984) took up Hopper's observation that the use of the perfective in Russian indicates foreground and the imperfective background structures. To examine this hypothesis, she analyzed Tolstoy's children's story "Tri Medvedja" (The Three Bears) and three of Chekhov's short stories in Russian. Chvany was able to show that in past tense narratives, the imperfective was indeed used as the indicator for background; the only exceptions were literary effects. In present tense narrative, the imperfective expressed both foreground and background (1984: 267).

   More recently, Sahonenko (2004) analyzed spoken narratives produced by ten Russian and ten German native speakers. Her main finding for Russian texts in the past tense, which constituted 40% of all texts, was that switching from foreground to background structure co-occurred with a change in grammatical aspect: from the perfective (foreground) to the imperfective (background). However, another pattern was found for German: the vast majority of texts were told in the present tense, in which no tense switching occurred. Along similar lines, Bardovi-Harlig (2000: 284) proposed that the shift between fore-

ground and background in English is not primarily carried by tense-aspect morphology.

In summary, the general consensus is that all languages differentiate between foreground and background structures. Studies on Russian agree that native speakers of Russian use tense aspect switching to differentiate between foreground and background. Speakers of other languages, English and German, for example, do not employ tense aspect switching but other linguistic means for this purpose. However, there are very few studies that analyze tense aspect switching in empirical, data-based terms, and none of them has conducted a systematic examination of the alternation between foreground and background in a large-scale corpus of L2 written texts.

2.2. Switching between Foreground and Background by L2 Speakers

The first study addressing switching between foreground and background in Russian-speaking learners of English was by Flashner (1989). She analyzed spoken narratives of three Russian learners of English, showing that all three had a basic system consisting of the opposition between past and non-past in the L2 but this did not correspond semantically to the present past distinction made by native speakers of English. Russian-speaking learners used past endings when referring to completed events and non-past endings when referring to non-completed events. In other words, Russian-speaking learners relied on aspectual notions from their L1, mapping the imperfective-perfective distinction onto the present past distinction in L2. Their differentiating between foreground and background in the L2 was interpreted as a case of transfer of grammatical aspect from L1 (1989: 95).

Bardovi-Harlig (1992) analyzed oral and written narratives produced by sixteen L2 learners of English with different first languages and 24 native speakers of English. She found that L2 learners of English deviated from L1 speakers in that they made use of past tense forms to mark foreground and non-past forms to mark background. Unlike Flashner (1989), Bardovi-Harlig did not interpret these results as a consequence of transfer but rather as a general learner strategy for structuring text.

Boettger (2008) studied a large number of different types of written texts (letters, essays, term papers, master theses, etc.) produced by Russian-speaking learners of German. She found that L2 learners dif-

fered from native speakers of German in switching between past and non-past forms in present as well as past-tense contexts. Boettger interpreted this as transfer of aspectual distinctions from L1 Russian. The imperfective was realized in L2 German as the preterite form, whereas the perfective aspect was mapped onto the perfect form in a non-native manner. Although foreground-background alternation was not the focus of this study, many of her examples show that tense-aspect switching co-occurred with the foreground-background distinction.

In a recent study Schmiedtová and Sahonenko (2008) analyzed elicited spoken narrations of short video clips. They compared 30 German native speakers, 30 Czech native speakers, and 30 Russian native speakers with 15 Czech and 15 Russian L2 speakers of German. The results point in the same direction as Flasher (1989) and Boettger (2008). Both learner groups often switched between present and past tense, using past tense to refer to completed situations, which was not nativelike. The authors interpreted these results in terms of L1 influence and concluded that for Czech and Russian speakers L2 tense-aspect switching serves to compensate for the lack of grammatical aspect in German (Schmiedtová and Sahonenko 2008: 67).

In general, then, L2 research on the interplay between tense-aspect morphology and the marking of foreground and background is limited to a few studies, all of which except for that of Bardovi-Harlig (1992) are based on text types different from the one investigated in the present paper (written narratives). All studies show that learners switch between different tense forms to mark distinctions in the information structure of the target language. There is no consensus yet as to whether tense switching in L2 texts occurs because of the L1 influence or whether it is a general learner strategy.

3. Conceptual Frame of Reference

This section introduces relevant terminology, discusses the notions of grammatical aspect and lexical aspect, and provides an overview of the tense systems of German and Russian.

3.1. Terminology

The notions BACKGROUND and FOREGROUND have been defined in rather different terms by researchers in narrative analysis. Labov (1972, 1982) makes a distinction between narrative clauses forming the NARRATIVE SKELETON or BACKBONE and free clauses providing the elaboration of the narrative and puts forward the idea of the so-called critical question (*And then what happened?*). Labov's distinction is similar to the conceptual framework of Klein and von Stutterheim (1987): the contrast between MAIN STRUCTURE and SIDE STRUCTURE. In their view, any piece of discourse is structured around an underlying topic-constituting question, the so-called QUAESTIO, with the main structure constituting a direct response to the quaestio posed by the particular discourse and bound to the story line. Clauses in side structure, in contrast, do not answer the given quaestio.

In the present study we use the BACKGROUND and FOREGROUND distinction as introduced by Hopper (1979: 214–16). In line with this framework we consider clauses expressing the main-line events in a temporal sequence to form the foreground of a narrative. In contrast, the background of a narrative consists of clauses referring to simultaneous events, which are only loosely connected and supply additional information (for a more detailed definition of background and foreground, see section 5.3).

The difference between various discourse types, such as descriptions, instructions, route directions, legal texts, etc., depends on the particular quaestio. In this manner, different types of quaestio lead to different discourse structures. For example, a typical feature of narrative texts—sequentiality between main structures—is not present in descriptions of spatial relations (Carroll 1993) or in legal texts (Becker and Klein 2008). In any kind of discourse, however, speaker-writers need to follow a particular train of thought to establish coherence in the text.

3.2. Grammatical vs. Lexical Aspect

In the present study, we make a distinction between grammatical and lexical aspect. The former is a grammatical category usually marked by inflectional morphology on the verb (e.g., affixes in Slavic languages, the *be V-ing* form in English). Lexical aspect, by contrast, is a

semantic category that expresses temporal characteristics of verb meanings and meanings of verbal predicates (lexical content) and hence has no direct connection to the time axis (Klein 1994: 99). Grammatical aspect is traditionally defined in terms of viewpoint, i.e., "viewing a situation from the outside or the inside" (e.g., Comrie 1976: 130, Smith 1992: 66). In our approach, in contrast, grammatical aspect denotes grammatically encoded concepts, such as perfectivity and imperfectivity. In line with a number of researchers (Vinogradov 1947, Maslov 1978, Bondarko 1995, 2003, Schlegel 2000) we assume that for most perfective verbs in Russian it is the case that completion is the underlying concept of perfectivity, such that the use of perfective aspect indicates that the "inner boundary" of a situation is encoded grammatically as having been attained. This means that Russian verbs—with the exception of bi-aspectual verbs and unpaired perfectives—require a grammatical marker for every situation to show whether or not the right boundary is reached. In other words, a situation is either presented as completed (i.e., the perfective aspect is used) or not completed (i.e., the imperfective aspect is used). Thus, the concept of completion is essential for the production of any text—whether in the past or future tense—in Russian. This is not the case in German, where the concept of completion is not encoded grammatically, so that its expression is possible but not obligatory.

We now turn to the notion of lexical aspect. Several lexical (or inherent) aspect classifications have been proposed (e.g., Vendler 1967, Smith 1992) and none of them are unproblematic. For the coding of the data in our study, we apply Klein's classification from 1994. He distinguishes between 0-state, 1-state, and 2-state verbs. These verb types roughly correspond with the classification proposed by Vendler (1967): 0-state verbs match states [–dynamic, –telic, –punctual]; 1-state verbs match activities [+dynamic, –telic, –punctual]; 2-state verbs include accomplishments [+dynamic, +telic, –punctual] and achievements [+dynamic, +telic, +punctual]. The following examples from our corpus of narratives written by native German speakers illustrate the different verb types:

(1) *0-state verbs* (states)—**'to be covered'**

Der Mann erwachte in einer Wüste, die mit Papier bedeckt war.
'The man woke up in a desert, which was covered by paper.'

(2)   *1-state verbs* (activities)—**'to dig'**

     Er gräbt immer weiter im Sand.
     'He digs farther and farther in the sand.'

(3)   a.   *2-state verbs* (achievements)—**'to land'**

       Er landet in der vierten Welt.
       'He lands in the fourth world.'

   b.   *2-state verbs* (accomplishments)—**'to form a little man'**

       Die kleinen Bröckchen formten sich dort wieder zu dem Männchen.
       'The little chunks there again formed a little man.'

Despite the fact that Klein's framework does not draw a distinction between Vendler's accomplishment and achievement, we prefer to use his classification because it is based on an abstract and transparent notion (the Topic Time),[1] which is applicable to numerous languages other than English.

As to the two languages investigated, they both encode lexical aspect in their verbs. These types are characterized by features such as ±dynamicity, ±telicity, and ±punctuality. Only Russian expresses grammatical aspect by means of inflectional morphology.

3.3. Tense

As far as the category of tense is concerned, most linguists agree that this is a verbal category whose basic function is to relate the time of speech to the time of assertion. Tense is therefore a deictic and relational category. German as well as Russian expresses tense morphologically. In the next section, we will have a closer look at the tense systems in both languages.

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[1] Topic Time (TT) is the time for which a particular assertion is made. For example, in *She was ill*, the TT precedes the time of utterance (TT < TU) and thus holds true for a time interval in the past, for which <a person be ill> applies.

3.3.1. Tense System in German

Depending on the description, German is said to have between two and eighteen tense forms (Thieroff 1992: 4). Following Duden, we distinguish six tense forms that are marked morphologically (cf. Fabricius-Hansen 2006). These are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. German Tense System

Present	Present	
	ich lese	
	I am reading / I read	
Past	**Preterite**	**Perfect**
	ich las	*ich habe gelesen*
	I read	I have read
		Past perfect
		ich hatte gelesen
		I had read
Future	**Future I**	**Future II**
	ich werde lesen	*ich werde gelesen haben*
	I will read	I will have read

Note. The English translation of the German examples are only approximate.

As can be seen in Table 1, the German tense system uses two synthetic forms (present, preterite) and four analytic forms (future I, future II, perfect, past perfect). The tense forms most frequently used by native speakers of German are the present, the preterite, and the perfect. The present tense can express a variety of meanings and can be used in many different contexts.

The preterite is a tense form used when referring to past events (Zifonun, Hoffmann, and Strecker 1997: 1697). In spoken German, it is often employed in alternation with the perfect (cf. Thieroff 1992). In written texts the use of the preterite and the perfect looks different. A corpus study by Hauser-Suida and Hoppe-Beugel (1972) showed that in written narratives the main tense was the preterite (79% of all past-

tense forms). Hennig (2000) demonstrated that the predominant form in official letters was the perfect, while the distribution of perfect and preterite in reports was more or less equal. This shows that the use of the two tense forms is dependent on the text type (2000: 74–75).

3.3.2. Tense-Aspect System in Russian

Russian has grammatical aspect as well as tense, marked by inflectional morphology on most finite verbs for tense and on most verbs (including infinitives, participles, and converbs) for aspect. Although tense and aspect are two separate categories in Russian, they do interact with each other in finite contexts. Interacting with grammatical aspect but not identical with it is lexical aspect, an inherent property of the verb. There has been a confusion of the two terms in the literature (for detailed discussion, see Klein 1994 and Schmiedtová and Flecken 2008). In our analysis we treat them separately.

In the Russian tense system, a distinction is made between past (the ending *-l*) and non-past (the absence of the ending *-l*). In the past tense, gender and number are marked, but there is no marking for person. In the present and future tenses, the verb is marked not only for tense and aspect, but also for person and number, but not for gender. Grammatical aspect is expressed by prefixes and suffixes. The different tense-aspect combinations are outlined in Table 2 on the next page. As can be seen in Table 2, all tense-aspect forms, except the imperfective future, are synthetic. Although the imperfective and the perfective present share the same form, the temporal interpretation of the perfective conjugated forms is future, meaning that there is no present perfective with a here-and-now reading in Russian.

According to Maslov (1984: 181), the most common tense used in narrative discourse in Russian is the preterite. As in German, historical present is also frequently found. Since in our data the present and the preterite were the most frequent forms used, we provide some additional information about them. The Russian present tense, like the German present tense, can be applied in different contexts. In line with Kopečný (1947), Isačenko (1982: 282) distinguishes between ongoing present tense (*aktual'noe nastojaščee*) and non-ongoing present tense (*neaktual'noe nastojaščee*). In contrast to the ongoing present tense, which forms a clear opposition to past and future, the non-ongoing

Table 2. Russian Tense-Aspect System

| | Aspect: | |
Tense	Imperfective	Perfective
Future	*ja budu delat'* I will be doing	*ja s-delaju* I will do
Present	*ja delaju* I am doing	
Preterite	*ja/ona/on/ono/oni* *delal(a/o/i)* I/he/she/it/they was/were doing	*ja/ona/on/oni* *s-delal(a/lo/li)* I/she/he/they did

Note. The English translations of the Russian examples are only approximate.

present tense is atemporal and can express various meanings. Since these meanings are comparable to those in German, we will not discuss them further.

The general temporal meaning of the preterite in Russian is similar to that in German: it depicts a time interval placed before the time of speech. In addition, the Russian preterite can occur in two aspectual forms: the perfective and the imperfective. This is determined by the context. The imperfective preterite is usually employed in iterative and ongoing contexts. The perfective preterite is primarily used for resultative situations.

Comparing the Russian and the German tense systems, we see that both systems express tense grammatically and that Russian has fewer tenses than German. In addition, Russian, in contrast to German, expresses grammatical aspect.

4. Research Hypothesis

Our hypothesis with regard to Russian L2 speakers of German is as follows: because completion is a crucial function of the perfective aspect, which in turn is used for marking foreground in L1 Russian, we expect that Russian-speaking L2 users of German will attempt to express the notion of completion in the target language when differentiating between foreground and background. Since German lacks

grammatical aspect, the L2 speakers will resort to tense forms instead. More specifically, they will switch between different tenses for distinguishing between foreground and background. This is supported by findings from previous studies indicating that L2 speakers switch between tenses in the L2 to mark information structure (Boettger 2008, Flashner 1989, Schmiedtová and Sahonenko 2008).

The study is innovative in terms of its independent variables: (i) it includes a larger population than used in comparable studies (two groups of L1 n=48, and one group of L2 n=24), (ii) participants are all advanced learner-speakers, hence creating a relatively homogenous population in terms of their language proficiency in L2, and (iii) the narrative texts were all elicited in writing. With respect to its dependent variables, the present study investigates the interplay between grammatical aspect and grounding. It goes beyond the use of the morphological form and focuses on the underlying concept of completion. We hypothesize that this concept is so prominent for the depiction of linguistic content in a Slavic language that this concept will also be present in L2 speakers' production in the L2. One could say that completion must—at least to some extent—also be realized in the L2. If the L2 is a non-aspect language,[2] it can be expected that L2 speakers will compensate for this lack in the target language, which in turn will be reflected in a non-target use of the past-tense forms in order to mark foreground and background.

5. Description of Study

5.1. Participants

The total research population (in Table 3) consisted of 48 writers of L1—Russian and German—and 24 Russian L2 speakers of German.

Every effort was made to follow parallel procedures across the board, including having similar populations in each of the three

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[2] The L2 in question is German, which, unlike Russian and English, is a non-aspectual language. Note, however, that although English and Russian grammaticalize aspect, their aspectual systems are very different, as are the devices used for marking information structure. It is therefore no surprise that tense-switching also occurs in L2 English.

Table 3. Database of L1 Control and L2 Research Groups, Specifying Length of Exposure (LOE) and Age of Arrival (AOA) of L2 Group by Source L1 and Target L2 Language

Language Group	ID	n	Age M (range)	Sex F/M	LOE M (range)	AOA M (range)
L1 German	G1G	24	23 (18–28)	13/11		
L1 Russian	R1R	24	19.5 (18–31)	13/11		
L1 Russian – L2 German	R1G	24	26.8 (22–32)	21/3	12 (6–27)	20 (15–25)

Note. Each group was identified by a specific label, as follows: L1 = G1G (German), R1R (Russian), L2 = R1G (Russian learners of German).

groups of participants with respect to general educational and socio-economic background, thus reducing the possible effects of factors other than the participants' specific language backgrounds. The German L1 and L2 data were collected in Heidelberg, the Russian data in Minsk.

All native speakers of German and Russian were university students in their twenties. The German native speakers were raised with German as the single language spoken by both parents and in the surrounding environment. At the time of the experiment they had knowledge of other languages, particularly English and French. The Russian native speakers were citizens of Belarus, but their mother tongue was Russian and, based on self-reports, they had no knowledge of Belarusian. If they had knowledge of any second language, it was English at a basic level of proficiency.

All L2 speakers in this study were highly proficient German L2 speakers. At the time of the data collection, they were enrolled in the University of Heidelberg[3] and had lived at least five years in Germany. They all spoke L2 German on a daily basis and, for the majority of the students (about 95% of all L2 speakers), German was a highly activated language according to self-assessment in the questionnaire.

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[3] To enroll at a German university all foreign students have to pass the Deutsche Sprachprüfung für den Hochschulzugang ausländischer Studienbewerber (DSH), a standardized language test which includes an extensive written and spoken language test.

5.2. Elicitation Procedures

The design of the study was adapted from a methodology devised in the framework of a large scale cross-linguistic project on advanced learner language in which narrative and expository texts were elicited in both speech and writing from L1 and advanced L2 learners of several different languages (Arabic, English, German, Hebrew, and Russian). In the present paper, we report on German and Russian native speakers as well as Russian-speaking L2 users of German.

We elicited written narrative texts based on a seven-minute animated film titled *Quest*, which depicts a story of a clay figure on a quest for water.[4] The story takes the figure through four different "worlds" or settings: (a) a sand world, (b) a paper world, (c) a rock world, and (d) a machine world, where he experiences all sorts of threats and dangers. All participants were told that they would see a short movie without any interruption. After the first complete viewing, they were shown the film a second time, but the investigator stopped the film after each segment. During each of these breaks, participants were asked to write down the story in their own words based on what had happened in that scene. For each segment, the students were given a maximum of 10 minutes to write the story down. At the beginning of the experiment, they were asked to start the story with the words *Once upon a time* / *Es war einmal* / *Žil-da-byl*.[5] This story opening was not repeated again. After the elicitation, the participants were asked to fill out a general questionnaire about their age, educational background, and foreign languages spoken. The entire session took about 50 minutes. Participants were not tested individually but in small groups. All students received 10 Euro for their participation.

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[4] The film *Quest* was produced in 1996 by Thomas Stellmach and directed by Tyron Montgomery and Thomas Stellmach. In 1997 *Quest* was awarded an Oscar for the best puppet animation film.

[5] We followed the rationale of the original experimental design devised in the framework of the larger project on Advanced Learner Language, keeping the leading question in the past tense. Since previous studies on *Quest* showed that participants from various languages consistently preferred to use the present tense in their film retellings, imposing the past-tense constraint was beneficial for eliciting tense switching.

5.3. Coding and Analysis

All data were transcribed in CHAT format[6] (MacWhinney 2000). An important aspect of the coding procedure was establishing strict criteria and novel methods for transcribing languages with non-Latin scripts, in our case Russian. Texts produced in German were transcribed in conventional Latin orthography, with adjustments to ensure all ASCII characters. This was necessary in order to enter all data in computer-compatible format for coding and analysis.

The clause was taken as the main text-line unit of analysis for all transcripts divided according to conventions established in earlier cross-linguistic studies (Berman and Slobin 1994, Berman and Verhoeven 2002, von Stutterheim 1997). The phrase, as our basic unit of analysis within a clause, is defined by language-particular criteria, with the same notation used to indicate set multi-lexemic expressions (e.g., English *all in all*, *on the whole*) and compound expressions (e.g., English *daydream*, *nighttime*).

At the first stage, coding focused on linguistic form and structure alone, followed by more functional analyses. For the present analysis, we coded for the following categories: finite verbs (including auxiliaries and full verbs), tense, grammatical aspect (only for Russian) and lexical aspect, argument structure (subject, object, local adjuncts), main clauses and subordinate clauses, and foreground and background structures.

For the last category, all clauses except the openings were coded. In line with Hopper (1979: 214–17), we used the criteria on the following page for coding of foreground and background structures.

For a structure representing the foreground, criteria 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 must apply; the third criterion is optional because dynamic events when expressing iterativity can also occur in the background. For the coding of background structures the first four criteria must apply. As to criterion 5 (irrealis) background structures can express realis; with respect to criterion 6 (finiteness), clauses in the background are frequently finite.

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[6] The CHAT tool is a transcription and coding format consisting of a set of obligatory tiers in the header (e.g., filename, participants, name, age, and sex of the subject) and any number of transcription and coding tiers.

	Foreground	**Background**
1.	Sequentiality	Simultaneity/Chronological overlapping
2.	Completion (view of event as a whole)	Non-Completion
3.	Dynamic	Static and descriptive situations
4.	Punctual/Singular events	Non-punctual/Iterative events
5.	Realis	Irrealis (subjunctives, optatives, other modal verb forms, negation)[7]
6.	Finite clauses	Non-finite clauses

The distinction between foreground and background does not always coincide with the syntactic division between main and subordinate clause (e.g., *Als er sich erhob* (subordinate clause in the foreground), *fand er sich in einer Welt wieder, die nur aus großen Papierseiten zu bestehen schien* 'As he stood up he found himself again in a world which appeared to consist of only big paper sheets').

Two coders carried out the coding of the data. Intercoder reliability was calculated in order to establish the extent to which the two coders assigned the same rating to each informant. Agreement was in the "almost perfect" range according to Landis and Koch's bench marks for assessing the relative strength of agreement (the average value of Cohen's kappa was 0.81). For the analyses of the data, non-parametric statistics were used, in particular the *chi*-square test for comparing proportions within one sample. Additionally, the *z*-test was applied in order to compare proportions from two independent samples.

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[7] We are aware that negated events in certain contexts are eligible to be foregrounded in narratives. Dickey and Kresin (2009) showed that negated clauses in Russian and Czech, often marked as perfectives, function as a kind of underspecified "pro-foreground event" requiring further specification (2009: 46). However, for the purpose of the present paper we adhere to Hopper's classification, according to which negated events are part of the background.

6. Results

Results are presented below, first for use of tense in the L1 texts by native speakers of German and Russian, followed by findings for the L2 speaker-writers.

6.1. Native Speakers of German

Following the introductory question posed in the past tense by the investigator, all 24 native speakers of German used preterite to begin the story. Example (4) is a typical opening for a German native speaker.

(4) (G1G12mnw)[8]

    a. es war   einmal   ein Lebewesen
        it $be_{PRT.3SG}$ once-upon-a-time a   human

        'once upon a time there was a human'

    b. das in einer Wüste aus Sand aufwachte   [**fore**]
        who in a   desert of   sand $awake_{PRT.3SG}$

        'who awoke in a desert made of sand'

    c. neben ihm lag   eine leere   Flasche   [**back**]
        next-to him $lie_{PRT.3SG}$ an   empty bottle

        'next to him lay an empty bottle'

When analyzing other parts of the narrative, a distinction was made between the following types of narrators (writers) depending on the main tense used in the text:

a) *Present-tense writers* switched from the past to the present tense right after the opening of the story and then wrote the rest of the text in the present tense. We label this type of switching *global tense switching*. This contrasts with *local tense switching*, which takes place within one scene; the switch here occurs between different scenes and does not have any textual function.

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[8] All examples are from data produced either by German or Russian native speakers; f = female, m = male, nw = narrative written.

b) *Mixed tense writers* seemed to be unsure as to what tense to use as the main tense in their narrations. For example, one of the two participants who produced a text of this type started with preterite and maintained this tense through the first two scenes, only to mix present and past tenses in the third scene and to switch to present tense in the last scene.

c) *Past-tense writers* did not switch at all.

In general, it is important to stress that whenever tense switching occurred in the German data, it was between present tense and the preterite. The perfect (12 occurrences out of the total 1720 clauses, 0.7%) and the past perfect (24 occurrences out of the total 1720 clauses, 1.4%) were hardly ever used. A classification of German native speakers according to tense forms used is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Tense Types Used by German Native Speakers

Group 1 – Present	Group 2 – Mixed	Group 3 – Past
n = 8	*n* = 2	*n* = 14

Note. n is number of speakers.

The majority of native speakers of German (*n* = 14) maintained the use of the past tense throughout the whole narration. In other words, the prompt to open with *Es war einmal* elicited texts narrated entirely in past tense for these participants. In these cases no tense switching could be found. Eight native speakers of German used the present tense, apart from the openings that were in past tense.[9]

(5) (G1G04fnw)

    a. es   war   einmal   ein   Sandmensch
       it   be$_{PRT.3SG}$ once   a   sand-human

    'once upon a time there was a sand human'

---

[9] We define an opening as the initial situation, i.e., everything that comes before the first event.

(5) b. der   mit   Sand zugedeckt   in der Wüste lag   [**back**]
      who with sand covered$_{PART}$ in the desert lie$_{PRT.3SG}$

   'who was lying covered with sand in the desert'

   c. der Sandmensch ist   mit einer Kruste aus
      the sand-human be$_{PRS.AUX.3SG}$ by   a   crust   of

   Sand   umgeben   [**back**]
   sand   surrounded$_{PART}$

   'the sand human is surrounded by a crust made of sand'

   d. als   er   erwacht   [**fore**]
      when   he   awake$_{PRT.3SG}$

   'when he awakes'

   [**The rest of the narration maintains present tense.**]

Only two texts were analyzed as mixed. The mixing between past and present does not systematically mark the differentiation between foreground and background structure but seems instead to be rather random.

Three points should be highlighted for German. (i) Native speakers of German rarely switch between different tenses in one and the same scene. The preference in German (despite the richness of tense forms) is to maintain one tense—present or preterite—throughout the text. (ii) When speakers switch tenses they do so almost exclusively from preterite (opening) to present tense. After this single (global) switch they rarely change the tense again. (iii) In the two mixed-tense texts, switching occurs within one scene. However it does not seem to conform to any principle of information structure.

6.2. Native Speakers of Russian

Like native speakers of German, Russian native speakers also followed the explicit prompt (*Žil da byl*) and wrote the first part of the story in past tense. In Russian, however, there were a number of examples where aspect and tense were changed to mark different structures in the narrative.

(6) (R1R04few)

a. v   poiskax   vody   on popal   v   kakoj-to strannyj
    in   search   water he fall*PF.PRT.3SG* into kind   strange

    mir   iz   kuskov bumagi   [**fore**]
    world from pieces paper

    'in search of water he fell into a kind of strange world made
    of pieces of paper'

b. duet   sil'nyj veter   [**back**]
    blows*IMPF.PRS.3SG* strong   wind

    'a strong wind is blowing'

c. i   vezde   ležit   bumaga   [**back**]
    and   everywhere lies*IMPF.PRS.3SG* paper

    'and there is paper lying everywhere'

d. no vot slux   čelovečika ulovil   zvuk
    but now hearing man   catch*PF.PRT.3SG* sound

    padajuščej kapli   [**fore**]
    falling   drop

    'but the man's ear caught a sound of a falling drop'

The text in example (6) shows a switch from perfective preterite in the
foreground (a, d) to imperfective present in the background (b, c).

At first glance, Russian native speakers are not very different from
German native speakers in terms of the main tense used in the text
(Table 5 below). The majority of Russian native speakers were past-
tense writers. The essential difference between the Russian and Ger-
man past tense writers who did not switch at all was that *all* Russian
past tense writers exhibited local aspect switching within one and the
same scene.

**Table 5.** Tense Types Used by Russian Native Speakers

Group 1 – Present	Group 2 – Mixed	Group 3 – Past
$n = 1$	$n = 4$	$n = 19$

Note. n is number of speakers.

(7) (R1R06fnw)

    a. čeloveček   pošel   dal'še   **[fore]**

       little man   start to walk$_{PF.PRT.M.3SG}$ further

       'little man started walking on'

    b. vsjudu   proisxodilo   dviženie   **[back]**

       everywhere happen$_{IMPF.PRT.N.3SG}$ motion

       'motion was happing everywhere'

    c. kamni   padali   **[back]**

       stones   fall$_{IMPF.PRT.3PL}$

       'stones were falling'

    d. i   on neostorožno nastupil   na   mesto   **[fore]**

       and he carelessly   step$_{PF.PRT.M.3SG}$ on   spot

       'and he carelessly stepped on the spot'

This switch is systematic in that it marks the distinction between foreground and background structure. In example (7) the clauses (b) and (c) that are marked for imperfective preterite are background structures elaborating on the surroundings of the stone world. Clauses (a) and (d) constitute the foreground of the text and are marked as perfective preterite. In other words, the perfective aspect is used to mark the foreground whereas the imperfective aspect marks the background.

Overall, we analyzed the use of tense-aspect across foreground and background in 19 Russian native speakers who used past tense to tell the story. The following picture emerged. Figure 1 on the next page shows that native speakers of Russian mainly use perfective aspect and the preterite (852 out of 1442 clauses, 59%) for marking the foreground. Other combinations of tense and aspect—the imperfective preterite (316 out of 1442 clauses, 22%) and the imperfective present (173 out of 1442 clauses, 12%)—were used to mark background structures. The remaining clauses (101 out of 1442 clauses, 7%) were nonfinite and are thus not considered. The native Russian speakers' preference for using the perfective preterite is statistically reliable (perfective preterite vs. all other categories used: $\chi^2(1) = 93.76$, $p < .001$).
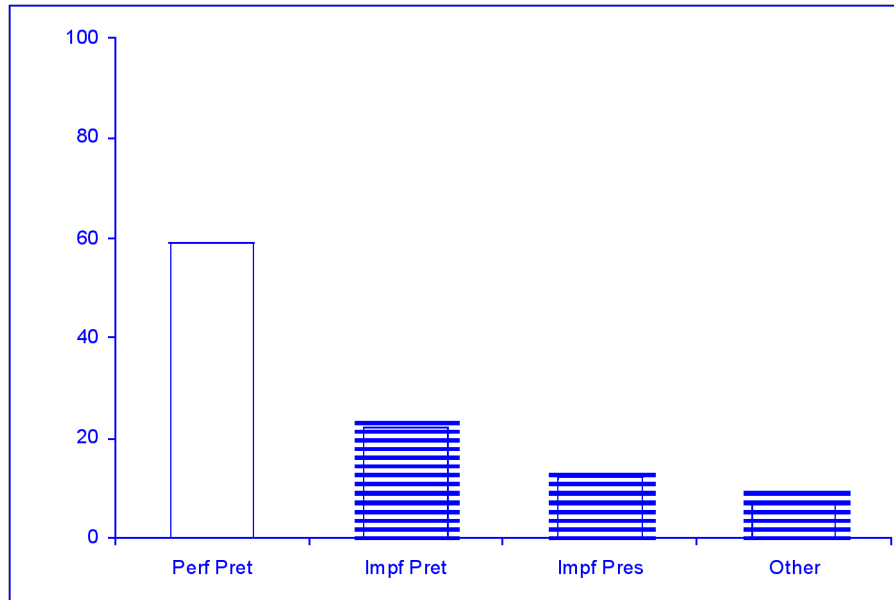
Figure 1. The use of tense-aspect in foreground-background
by 19 past-tense Russian L1 writers

These findings show that switching between foreground and background in Russian is a matter of switching between different aspects rather than different tenses. One can say that marking foreground and background in Russian is carried out by means of grammatical aspect and that tense switching seems to be secondary for this purpose. Of course, this only holds true for narrations in the past tense because when the present tense is used no switching takes place. In texts written in the present tense the foreground-background distinction is expressed by other linguistic means. Note that texts in the present tense are rare in our sample since only one Russian native speaker made use of this possibility.

In summary, our data show that native speakers of Russian and German do not use grammatical morphology to differentiate between foreground and background when writing narratives in the present tense. However, differences between the two groups do emerge when they produce written narrative texts in the past tense. Native speakers of Russian rely on aspectual morphology to distinguish between foreground and background, whereas native speakers of German do not

mark the distinction with verbal morphology. In Russian, there is a tendency for clauses representing foreground to be marked as past perfective, while clauses belonging to background structures tend to be marked either as past or as present imperfective.

7. The Use of Tense in L2 Data

Four Russian L2 speakers of German carried out tense switch right after the opening. The switch was from preterite to present tense (three instances) and to past or present perfect (one instance).

(8) (R1G16fnw)

    a. es war einmal ein Sandmann
       it was once a sandman

       'once upon a time there was a sandman'

    b. eines Tages wacht er in der Wüste auf   [**fore**]
       one day awake$_{PRS.N.3SG}$ he in the desert

       'one day he awakes in the desert'

    c. und hört das Wasser tropfen   [**fore**]
       and hear$_{PRS.N.3SG}$ the water drop$_{INF}$

       'and hears the water dropping'

After the initial *Es war einmal* a switch from preterite (a) to present tense (b) takes place. It seems that reducing the opening to only one clause is specific to L2 speakers since the openings in the data of German native speakers typically consist of several clauses (see example (5)). Example (8) demonstrates the L2 speakers' tendency to use less background.

Overall, three different patterns could be identified in the data of Russian-speaking L2 users of German: there were seven present-tense writers, eight mixed writers, and nine past-tense writers (see Table 6).

Table 6. Tense Types Used by Russian L2 Speakers of German

Group 1 – Present	Group 2 – Past	Group 3 – Mixed
n = 7	*n* = 9	*n* = 8

Note. *n* is number of speakers.

The first group that we examined consists of present-tense writers. As mentioned before, grammatical morphology is not used to mark the distinction between foreground and background by native writers of either Russian or German when writing in the present tense.

Similarly, Russian-speaking learners of German who use present tense in their L2 German do not switch between different tenses in order to mark foreground and background. The question that arises here is whether these L2 texts show other features that would distinguish them from texts in present tense written by native speakers of German. In order to assess this, we examined the distribution of foreground and background structures in present-tense texts written by German native speakers and Russian-speaking L2 users of German.

Table 7. Distribution between Foreground and
Background in Present Tense

Languages	Foreground	Background	Total
German native speakers (n = 8)	58% (310)	42% (221)	100% (531)
Russian L2 speakers of German (n = 7)	65% (298)	35% (164)	100% (462)

Note. Absolute numbers in parentheses, n = number of speakers.

A z-test revealed that Russian L2 speakers of German used more foreground structures in present tense than German native speakers in their L2 narratives (z = 1.79, p < .05). No analysis was made for present-tense texts produced by L2 speakers compared to present-tense texts of Russian native speakers since only one native speaker of Russian produced such a text.

The second group consisted of past-tense writers. Like German native speakers, they too used mainly preterite. From a total of 465 clauses there were only 8 instances of tense switching from the preterite to past perfect in these texts. That is, tense switching is not taken as relevant for past-tense texts.

Following our analysis for texts by present-tense writers, we examined the distribution of foreground and background in the past

texts of Russian-speaking L2 users of German *(n* = 9), German native speakers *(n* = 14), and added Russian native speakers *(n* = 19) for comparison.

Table 8. The Distribution between Foreground and Background in Past Tense

Languages	Foreground	Background	Total
German native speakers (*n* = 14)	56% (570)	44% (451)	100% (1021)
Russian native speakers (*n* = 19)	59% (849)	41% (593)	100% (1442)
Russian L2 speakers of German (*n* = 9)	65% (304)	35% (161)	100% (465)

Note. Absolute numbers in parentheses, *n* = number of speakers.

We conducted a *z*-test to compare native speakers and L2 speakers of German for their use of foreground and background. Similar to the pattern found for present-tense texts, Russian L2 speakers of German produced significantly more foreground structures than German native speakers (*z* = 3.47, *p* < .05). Another z-test showed that in comparison to Russian native speakers' distribution of foreground and background structures, Russian-speaking L2 users of German used more foreground structures in the target language (*z* = 2.49, *p* < .05). Overall, we can say that Russian-speaking L2 users of German display a learner-specific strategy in L2 German in that they have an overly high proportion of foreground to background structures. This pattern holds true for present- as well as past-tense texts.

The third group are mixed-tense writers (*n* = 8). Table 9 shows the distribution of the four different tenses used. Russian-speaking L2 users of German not only switched in German from present to preterite or present perfect, but also switched from preterite to present perfect in one and the same scene.

Table 9. Tense Types Used by Mixed-Tense
Russian-Speaking L2 Users of German

Present	Preterite	Perfect	Past Perfect	Total
34% (158)	46% (217)	19% (91)	1% (4)	100% (470)

Note. Absolute numbers in parentheses.

Three groups could be identified in the mixed-tense writers. Group 1 consists of two L2 speakers (R1G13 and R1G17). Their switching takes place between the present and the past tense, either preterite or perfect. Foreground structures are marked with present tense, background structures with past tense. An example of this is in (9).

(9) (R1G13mnw)

    a. alles   war   grau und   windig   **[back]**

        everything be$_{PRT.3SG}$ grey and   windy

        'everything was grey and windy'

    b. die blätter flogen   überall   hin   and her   **[back]**

        the sheets fly$_{PRS.3PL}$ everywhere back and forth

        'the sheets flew around to and fro'

    c. aber plötzlich sieht   er eine nasse stelle   **[fore]**

        but suddenly see$_{PRS.3SG}$ he a   wet   spot

        'but suddenly he sees a wet spot'

    d. und läuft   dahin   **[fore]**

        and   run$_{PRS.3SG}$ there

        'and runs there'

In example (9) we can see a switch between past tense in the background (a) and (b) to present tense in the foreground (c) and (d).

Group 2 consists of three L2 speakers of German (R1G11, R1G21, and R1G24). These L2 speakers switch between present perfect used for foreground structures and preterite used for background structures. In other words, the switching occurs between two different past tenses. The next example shows this phenomenon.

(10) (R1G21fnw)

    a. der Sandmensch ist   auf einem Ort   gelandet
       the sandman   be$_{PRS.AUX.3SG}$ in a   place land$_{PART}$

       'the sandman landed in a place'   [**fore**]

    b. an dem   sehr viele Papierblätter   lagen   [**back**]
       on which very many sheets-of-paper lie$_{PRT.3PL}$

       'in which many sheets of paper were lying'

    c. es war   da   sehr windig   [**back**]
        it be$_{PRT.3SG}$ there very windy

       'it was very windy there'

    d. und ab und zu flogen   ihm die Papierblätter   [**back**]
       and at-times   fly$_{PRT.3PL}$ him the sheets-of-paper

       ins   Gesicht
       in-the face

       'and now and then sheets of paper flew in his face'

    e. da   hat   er wieder die Geräusche vom [**fore**]
       then have$_{PRS.AUX.3SG}$ he again   the sounds   of-the

       Wassertropfen gehört
       water-drop   hear$_{PART}$

       'then he heard the sounds of water dripping again'

    f. und eine feuchte Stelle gesehen   [**fore**]
       and a   humid   spot   see$_{PART}$

       'and saw a damp spot'

In example (10) a systematic correlation between tense use and the marking of foreground and background can be observed. The first clause (a) together with clauses (e) and (f) sets up the foreground. The tense used in these clauses is present perfect. The background structures in example (10) are realized in clauses (b), (c), and (d), which are systematically marked with the preterite.

In Group 3 are three L2 speakers of German (R1G19, R1G22, and R1G23) who switch between preterite and present or present perfect in order to differentiate between foreground and background. Preterite is employed for the foreground, perfect or present for the background. This is illustrated in example (11).

(11) (R1G23fnw)

    a. und landete   in einer anderen Wüste in   [**fore**]
       and land$_{PRT.3SG}$ in another   desert in

       der Steinwüste
       the rocky-desert

       'and he landed in another desert, in the rocky desert'

    b   überall   nur Steine kleine   große   [**back**]
       everywhere only stones little ones big ones

       'everywhere were only stones, little ones and big ones'

    c. der Mensch schafft   es noch auszuweichen   [**fore**]
       the human manage$_{PRS.3SG}$ it   yet get out of the way$_{INF}$

       'the man barely manages to get out of the way'

    d. damit ein Stein ihm nicht auf den Kopf fällt   [**back**]
       for   a   stone him not   on the head fall$_{PRT.3SG}$

       'for a stone not to fall on his head'

    e. der Mensch zog   weiter durch   die Wüste
       the human wander$_{PRT.3SG}$ further through the desert

       'the man wandered on through the desert'   [**fore**]

The narration in (11) is an example of the use of preterite in clauses (a) and (e) and of a switch from preterite to present tense in (d). The clause in (d) belongs together with the non-finite clause in (b) to the background of the story. The foreground (a) and (e) is marked with the preterite. The only exception from this switching pattern is the clause in (c), in which a foreground structure is expressed in the present tense. This instance could be seen as a narrative device to make a particular event in the foreground more vivid and/or salient than other foregrounded events (Kurt 2003: 271–72). In our data base we find only a few instances of this type of switch, and they all are produced by learners, not by native speakers.

We can observe that although mixed tense writers do not systematically assign a specific tense form to mark foreground and another to mark background, they switch between any two tenses to distinguish these two types of structures.

It is important to emphasize that we did not find a single instance of tense switching used for organizing information flow in the data of German native speakers.

In summary, three groups of L2 writers could be identified as follows: (i) Present-tense writers who did not switch at all. This result is not surprising, since neither Russian nor German L1 speakers switch between tenses in a present-tense context. (ii) Past-tense L2 writers who also did not use temporal switching for structuring information. In this respect, these L2 speakers were comparable to German native speakers. However, additional analysis revealed that they produced considerably more foreground structures than German native speakers. (iii) Mixed L2 writers who, unlike German native speakers, made systematic use of different tense forms to distinguish foreground from background.

8. Discussion

The present study demonstrates that in written narratives alternation between foreground and background in Russian is primarily carried out by aspect switching. In line with previous claims (e.g., Hopper, 1979, 1982), our results provide empirical evidence that perfective aspect marks foreground while imperfective aspect marks background for *narrative texts written in the past tense*.[10] As we expected, native speakers of German do not use tense switching for grounding in written texts. The main tense used was the preterite, followed by the present tense.[11] This is different from corresponding spoken narratives, which tend to be produced solely in the present tense (Sahonenko 2004).

Let us now turn to our research hypothesis. Russian-speaking L2 users of German will attempt to express the notion of completion in the target language. More specifically, they will switch between different tenses in order to distinguish between foreground and background. Not all L2 speakers confirmed our hypothesis.

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[10] Note that this finding is based on elicited production of non-literary data and may not hold for other text types or registers, e.g., spoken colloquial language or written literary texts—"belles-lettres" (cf. Dickey 2000, Kurt 2003).

[11] "Main tense" is very similar to what Berman and Slobin have called "dominant" or "anchor" tense (Berman and Slobin 1994: 131–34).

In the past-tense group, L2 speakers did not switch between tenses and were thus comparable to the control group. We interpret these results as an indication that the L2 speakers from the past-tense group were able to use information organization principles in a target-like manner. In this sense, these learners were able to detach themselves from the L1 notion of [±completion] and successfully acquired the organizational principle of the target language.

Our hypothesis was confirmed by the results of the mixed group. Here the L2 speakers switched between different tense forms to differentiate between foreground and background. Three different strategies were used here: (i) present for foreground vs. preterite or perfect for background, (ii) perfect for foreground vs. preterite for background, and (iii) preterite for foreground vs. present or perfect for background. In all three strategies, L2 speakers relied on the opposition between two tense forms, and one of these forms was the past tense.

In the present-tense group, L2 speakers did not switch tenses at all. This is not surprising, since neither German nor Russian native speakers switch between tenses in this context. Additionally, the task employed for the present study, the retelling of a film, proved not to be a very reliable instrument for eliciting past tense. For future studies, we would need to employ a different task, for example, the recounting of a story in actual past tense, to avoid the frequent use of the historical tense and increase the use of the past tense.

For all three groups (mixed, present, and past writers), the distribution of foreground and background structures in their texts was different from the distribution found in the native speakers' data. Overall, the L2 speakers used a lower proportion of background structures than native speakers. This is in line with previous studies, in which it was observed that in any narration task learners may feel compelled to give more attention to the foreground and less to the background (Tomlin 1984, in Bardovi-Harlig 2000: 320). In other words, L2 speakers may reduce the number of background structures because they relate to the foreground structures alone following the given quaestio. We interpret the findings related to the lower proportion of background structures in the target language as indication of a learner strategy to simplify and reduce information structure. Note that in our coding the distinction between foreground and background does not coincide with the distinction between main and subordinate clauses.

Therefore, this difference cannot be explained in terms of a less complex syntax in the L2 speakers.

In the SLA literature no consensus has been reached yet as to the role of the L1 in the acquisition of tense/aspect in the target language. For example, Bardovi-Harlig (1992, 2000) and Dietrich, Klein, and Noyau (1995) showed that the L1 influence in this particular domain is rather minimal or even non-existent. Other studies (Boettger 2008, Carroll and von Stutterheim 2003, Schmiedtová and Sahonenko 2008, von Stutterheim and Carroll 2003), however, demonstrated that, especially in the aspectual domain, the L1 has a significant influence on the L2. The difference in results found by these studies could be related to the fact that they examined different proficiency groups (e.g., beginners vs. advanced learners) and investigated different language modi (e.g., written vs. spoken) and text types (e.g., narratives vs. descriptions) in different experimental settings (e.g., controlled elicitation vs. interview). In our opinion the two positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive but could be seen as implying that at the onset of L2 acquisition the learner may rely more on a general learner strategy while at more advanced stages the influence of the L1 becomes more apparent.

The findings of the present study are more in line with studies arguing for a prominent role of the L1 in the domain of tense-aspect. We have shown that a third of the L2 speakers relied on the concept of completion from the L1, which in turn influenced the way they applied the principle of grounding in the L2.

However, in order to have a better understanding of the factors that influence organization of information in the L2, additional studies on written texts using the same task but different source (e.g., non-aspect) and target (e.g., aspect) languages are necessary.

9. Conclusion

In narrative discourse languages use the grounding principle in a specific way, which is dependent on the linguistic devices available in the respective linguistic systems. On the basis of a larger database, we were able to show that German and Russian native speakers rely on different strategies when they express foreground and background structures in writing. These strategies are directly linked to the presence (in Russian) or the absence (in German) of grammatical aspect.

The findings from native speakers are supported by the results of L2 speakers. We have demonstrated that one third of the advanced Russian-speaking L2 users of German seem to have failed to recognize that German does not make a grammatical distinction between foreground and background. Specifically, these L2 speakers relied on the L1 concept of completion and used it when grounding in the L2. This was reflected in tense switching in the target language. Although these L2 speakers succeeded in learning the forms and their appropriate functions in the target language, they had difficulties in mapping these forms to the principles of information structure. An explanation for this may be that these principles are highly abstract and implicit, and the learner must extract the correct forms directly from the given information.

Our study also showed that one third of the Russian-speaking L2 users of German were able to acquire the organization principles in a target-like way. These L2 speakers did not employ tense switching to differentiate between background and foreground but relied on the use of inherent lexical properties of the predicate instead. This result suggests that for some very proficient L2 speakers, nativelike narrative competence is attainable at an advanced level of proficiency.

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