

Verb Tenses as a Tool of Text Construction in English: A Functional Approach

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Abstract. The article examines the functional role of English verb tenses in the process of text construction. The main aim of the study is to show that verb tenses function not only as a grammatical category but also as an important resource in text organisation, ensuring logical sequencing and expressing communicative intent. The study analyses the role of verb tenses in the formation of textual cohesion and coherence based on Systemic Functional Linguistics and discourse analysis approaches. In particular, it demonstrates how tense selection in different types of texts—especially narrative and academic styles—influences the presentation of information and its interpretation by the reader. The analysis is based on a corpus-based qualitative approach and investigates the impact of tense selection on discourse organisation at both micro (sentence and inter-sentential) and macro (textual and genre) levels. The results show that verb tenses do not only express temporal relations but also function as key discourse resources that ensure textual structural integrity, regulate information flow, and define genre distinctions. At the same time, inappropriate selection of tense forms may reduce textual clarity and communicative effectiveness. From this perspective, studying verb tenses within a functional framework is of significant importance for both theoretical linguistics and practical language use.

Keywords: verb tenses, text construction, discourse analysis, functional linguistics, cohesion, coherence, tense–aspect system

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İngilis dilində feil zamanları mətnyaratma vasitəsi kimi: funksional yanaşma

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Xülasə. Bu məqalədə ingilis dilində feil zamanlarının mətnyaratma prosesində funksional rolu araşdırılır. Tədqiqatın əsas məqsədi feil zamanlarının yalnız qrammatik kateqoriya kimi deyil, həm də mətnin qurulması, məntiqi ardıcılığın təmin edilməsi və kommunikativ niyyətin ifadəsində mühüm vasitə kimi çıxış etdiyini göstərməkdir. Məqalədə sistem-funksional dilçilik və diskurs təhlili yanaşmaları əsasında feil zamanlarının mətnin koherensiyası və koheziyasının formalaşmasındakı

rolu təhlil edilir. Xüsusilə, müxtəlif mətn növlərində – narrativ və elmi üslublarda – zaman seçiminin informasiyanın təqdim olunmasına və oxucu tərəfindən qavranılmasına təsiri göstərilir. Analiz korpus əsaslı keyfiyyət yanaşmasına söykənir və mikro (cümlə və cümlələrarası) və makro (mətn və janr) səviyyələrdə zaman seçiminin diskursun təşkilinə təsirini araşdırır. Nəticələr göstərir ki, feil zamanları yalnız zaman münasibətlərini ifadə etmir, həm də mətnin struktur bütövlüyünü təmin edən, informasiya axınıni tənzimləyən və janr fərqlərini müəyyən edən əsas diskurs vasitələrindən biridir. Eyni zamanda, zaman formalarının düzgün seçilməməsi mətnin aydınlığını və kommunikativ effektivliyini azalda bilər. Bu baxımdan, feil zamanlarının funksional yanaşma çərçivəsində öyrənilməsi həm nəzəri dilçilik, həm də praktik dil istifadəsi üçün mühüm əhəmiyyət kəsb edir.

Açar sözlər: *feil zamanları, mətnyaratma, diskurs təhlili, funksional dilçilik, koheziya, koherensiya, zaman-aspekt sistemi*

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Introduction

Verb tense is one of the most intensively studied categories in English linguistics, yet its role in constructing coherent, purposeful texts remains systematically undertheorised. The dominant tradition — from Jespersen (1924) through Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985) — has produced meticulous inventories of tense forms and their semantic correspondences but has done so at the sentence level, treating tense as a property of individual clauses rather than as a resource operating across stretches of discourse. Recent decades have seen growing interest in the discourse-level functions of tense (Sanders & Van Krieken, 2019; Egetenmeyer et al., 2024), yet there is still limited systematic integration of micro-level and macro-level tense functions across discourse genres, particularly in narrative and academic texts. To address this gap, this study proposes a dual-level functional model that distinguishes micro-level clause semantics from macro-level discourse organisation in tense usage. The study adopts a functional perspective on verb tenses, focusing not merely on what tenses mean in isolation but on what they accomplish in the process of text construction. It argues that tense selection is primarily driven by discourse-structuring needs rather than purely temporal reference, including sequencing events, managing perspective, creating cohesion, signalling genre, and guiding reader interpretation. The study is guided by three research questions: (1) What functional roles do tense selections perform at the micro-level (sentence and inter-clausal) in English discourse? (2) How do tense patterns construct temporal organisation and genre identity at the macro-level? (3) How can motivated tense shifts—which serve discourse-structuring functions—be distinguished from unmotivated shifts that result in incoherence?

The theoretical framework integrates four traditions that converge on this functional reconception. Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) treats tense as a system of meaningful choices serving ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions simultaneously. Discourse grounding theory (Hopper, 1979; Hopper & Thompson, 1980; Longacre, 1996) reveals how tense–aspect distinctions partition discourse into foreground and background planes. Text linguistics (de Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981; Firbas, 1992; Smith, 2003) positions tense as a cohesive device and a signal of discourse mode. Tense–aspect theory (Reichenbach, 1947; Comrie, 1976, 1985;

Klein, 1994) provides the semantic architecture for understanding how reference points create temporal progression and depth. Together, these traditions demonstrate that tense is a multi-level text construction system that no single-sentence analysis can adequately capture.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework. Section 3 outlines the methodology, including the analytical procedures for micro-level and macro-level analysis as well as the corpus materials employed. Section 4 presents the functional analysis of tense in text construction, with a focus on comparisons between narrative and academic registers. Section 5 discusses the implications for discourse theory and language pedagogy. Section 6 concludes the study by synthesising the main findings. The study contributes to the field by demonstrating that tense operates as a multi-level discourse resource rather than a purely temporal grammatical category.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Systemic functional linguistics and the limits of clause-centric tense analysis

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) reconceptualises grammar as a network of meaning-making choices, where tense operates simultaneously within ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This model has been highly influential in shifting attention from tense as a purely temporal category to tense as a multifunctional resource embedded in discourse. However, this strength is also its main limitation. While SFL successfully explains how tense contributes to meaning within clauses, it has been criticised for remaining overly "grammar-centred", making it less precise in explaining how tense functions across extended stretches of discourse. Bache (2008), for example, argues that Halliday's recursive tense system risks over-generalisation by collapsing distinct semantic domains (tense, aspect, action) into a unified structure. From this perspective, SFL provides a powerful descriptive framework but does not fully capture how tense choices operate dynamically across genre-level text organisation. Therefore, while SFL is retained as a foundational model in this study, it is complemented with discourse-oriented approaches that better account for textual development beyond the clause.

2.2. Discourse grounding theory: from binary opposition to gradient structure

Hopper's (1979) grounding theory marked a major shift by demonstrating that tense and aspect do not simply encode time, but structure discourse into foreground and background layers. In this model, perfective forms typically advance the narrative, while imperfective or stative forms provide descriptive or explanatory background. Yet subsequent research has shown that this binary model is too restrictive. Longacre (1996) challenges the sharp foreground/background division by introducing a scalar model of discourse salience, where textual elements operate on multiple levels of prominence rather than a simple opposition. Similarly, Hopper and Thompson (1980) extend the analysis by linking grounding to transitivity, but their model still struggles to account for mixed or transitional discourse zones. Schifffrin (1981) further complicates the picture by showing that tense variation in narrative is not only structural but also evaluative and interactional. Her findings suggest that tense shifts—such as the historical present—cannot be fully explained by grounding alone, as they also index speaker stance and discourse engagement. Taken together, these studies indicate a key theoretical tension: grounding theory successfully explains narrative structure at a macro level, but it remains insufficient to explain fine-grained pragmatic and genre-sensitive tense variation.

2.3. Text linguistics and the problem of discourse mode overlap

De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) treat tense as part of textual cohesion, while Firbas (1992) extends this by showing that tense contributes to information flow through communicative dynamism. These approaches highlight how tense operates as a cohesive and informational resource rather than a purely grammatical marker. Smith's (2003) discourse mode theory represents a significant advance by linking tense interpretation to broader textual types such as Narrative,

Description, and Argument. This model convincingly demonstrates that the same tense form can function differently depending on discourse mode. However, Smith's framework has two major limitations. First, discourse modes are not strictly separable in real texts; academic and narrative genres frequently blend multiple modes within a single passage. Second, the model is largely descriptive and does not fully explain how transitions between modes are linguistically signalled. This gap is important for the present study: it suggests that tense not only reflects discourse mode but may actively function as a mechanism for mode transition. Accordingly, this study extends Smith's framework by analysing tense shifts as indicators of functional movement between discourse modes.

2.4. Tense–aspect theory: formal models and their discourse limitations

Reichenbach's (1947) three-point model (Speech time, Event time, Reference time) remains the most influential formal account of tense. It successfully explains temporal relations such as the distinction between simple past and present perfect, and it provides a logical basis for sequence-of-tense phenomena. Comrie (1976, 1985) extends this framework typologically, distinguishing between absolute, relative, and absolute-relative tense systems. Klein (1994) further refines the model by introducing Topic Time, shifting the analysis from abstract temporal points to discourse-relevant time intervals. Despite their precision, these formal models share a common limitation: they primarily account for temporal structure, not textual function. They explain when events occur relative to each other, but not why writers choose specific tense forms to achieve rhetorical or discourse-structuring effects. As a result, while Reichenbach, Comrie, and Klein provide essential semantic foundations, they must be integrated with discourse-oriented theories (Hopper, Smith, Halliday) to fully explain tense as a text-building resource.

2.5. Synthesis: the need for an integrated Micro–Macro model

Across the reviewed traditions, a consistent theoretical gap emerges. Formal semantic models (Reichenbach, Comrie, Klein) explain temporal structure but not discourse function. Functional models (Halliday, Hopper, Smith) explain discourse organisation but often lack precise formal mechanisms. This creates a theoretical fragmentation: tense is simultaneously treated as a temporal system, a grammatical choice system, and a discourse-structuring device—but rarely as all three at once.

The present study addresses this gap by proposing an integrated micro–macro model in which:

- formal tense–aspect relations explain micro-level clause structure
- grounding and discourse modes explain meso-level text organisation
- genre and register theory explain macro-level discourse function

This synthesis allows tense to be analysed not as a single grammatical category, but as a layered system of text construction operating across multiple levels of discourse.

3. Methods

3.1. Analytical design

The study employs a qualitative, theory-driven analytical framework combining micro-level and macro-level discourse analysis. This two-tier design is motivated by the recognition that tense functions cannot be fully accounted for at a single level of analysis: sentence-level tense choices gain their full discursive meaning only in relation to the larger text in which they are embedded (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, pp. 23–32; Smith, 2003, p. 17). The analytical approach is therefore integrative, moving between clause grammar and discourse organisation to trace how individual tense selections accumulate into genre-defining textual patterns.

3.2. *Corpus materials and selection rationale*

The study draws illustrative examples from two discourse domains represented by established corpora. Corpus selection is based on three criteria: (a) ecological validity (naturally occurring language data), (b) genre representativeness, and (c) availability and replicability in prior research. Narrative fiction is represented using short stories and novel excerpts drawn from the British National Corpus (BNC; Leech et al., 1994) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; Davies, 2010). Together, these corpora provide naturally occurring data that capture key features of narrative discourse, including foregrounding–backgrounding patterns and viewpoint management in literary prose. The BNC was selected because its 100-million-word balanced design includes extensive samples of contemporary British fiction. In contrast, COCA was chosen due to its register-balanced structure and its longitudinal coverage (1990–present), which makes it possible to compare narrative fiction with academic English within the same corpus environment.

Academic writing is represented by research articles in linguistics and applied linguistics taken from the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus (Nesi & Gardner, 2012, pp. 12–18). BAWE was chosen because, unlike corpora consisting primarily of expert research articles, it includes assessed student writing at advanced levels, which aligns well with the pedagogical perspective of this study (Section 5). Corpus examples are used throughout the analysis to ensure that the identified functional patterns are grounded in authentic language use rather than constructed examples, following corpus-pragmatic methodology (Römer, 2016; Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018).

3.3. *Step-by-Step analytical procedure*

The qualitative analysis was conducted through a six-step coding procedure, applied iteratively to all selected passages and refined through multiple readings:

Step 1 — Passage selection. Extended passages of 150–300 words were selected from the corpora described above, with equal representation of narrative and academic registers.

Step 2 — Clause segmentation. Each passage was segmented into independent and dependent clauses. Verbal groups were identified and annotated for tense form (simple, progressive, perfect, perfect-progressive) and aspect (perfective, imperfective).

Step 3 — Reference-point coding. Each clause was coded for its Reichenbachian configuration (S, E, R relationships) following Reichenbach (1947) and Klein (1994), allowing identification of absolute, relative, and absolute-relative tense forms.

Step 4 — Grounding classification. Each clause was classified as foreground or background following Hopper (1979) and Hopper and Thompson (1980), with intermediate categories on Longacre's (1996) salience cline used where the binary classification was inadequate.

Step 5 — Discourse-mode identification. The dominant discourse mode of each passage was identified using Smith's (2003) five-mode typology (Narrative, Description, Report, Information, Argument). Mode transitions within passages were marked at the clause boundary where they occurred.

Step 6 — Functional classification of tense shifts. Each tense shift within a passage was classified as motivated (serving an identifiable discourse function such as grounding contrast, mode transition, viewpoint change, or evaluative emphasis) or unmotivated (producing processing difficulty or genre–register mismatch). The criteria for this classification are formalised in Table 1 in Section 4.

Inter-coder reliability was not formally tested because the analysis is interpretive rather than enumerative; however, every coding decision is grounded in published criteria from at least one of the four theoretical traditions, making the procedure transparent and replicable. The minimal-pair method—comparing identical propositions in contrasting tense forms—was used throughout to isolate the functional variable under investigation.

4. Analysis: tense as a multi-level text construction resource

4.1. Micro-level analysis: tense at the sentence and inter-clausal level

At the sentence level, tense selections are never semantically inert. Consider the following pair of constructions:

(1a) The experiment *showed* that temperature affects reaction rates.

(1b) The experiment *has shown* that temperature affects reaction rates.

In (1a), the simple past *showed* locates both the event and the reference point before speech time, creating a closed, completed frame. The finding is attributed to a specific past experiment and, by implication, may be superseded. In (1b), the present perfect *has shown* places the event before speech time but aligns the reference point with the present, asserting ongoing relevance. The reader interprets (1b) as a claim with current validity—a subtle but consequential difference in academic argumentation. This is not a matter of temporal accuracy (the experiment occurred at the same time in both cases) but of *discursive positioning*: the writer uses tense to signal whether a finding is historically bounded or presently operative.

At the inter-clausal level, tense manages temporal progression through the mechanism Reichenbach (1947, p. 290) identified as reference-point permanence. In narrative discourse, a sequence of simple past clauses advances the reference time:

(2) She *opened* the door. The hallway *was* dark. She *stepped* inside and *reached* for the light switch. Here, *opened*, *stepped*, and *reached* are foregrounded events in perfective aspect, each advancing the storyline's temporal reference point. *Was* (dark) is a stative, backgrounded description that does not advance time but provides simultaneous scene-setting—precisely the foreground–background distinction Hopper (1979, p. 215) theorised. The reader processes these clauses differently: the perfective verbs create forward momentum, while the stative clause invites spatial visualisation without temporal progression. This pattern is systematic: as Klein's (1994, p. 109) Principle of Natural Order predicts, perfective clauses in narrative establish AFTER relations between successive Topic Times, generating the temporal chain that constitutes plot.

The introduction of past perfect creates a further layer of temporal architecture:

(3) She *opened* the door. The hallway *was* dark—someone *had removed* the bulb. She *stepped* inside. The past perfect *had removed* signals a flashback—an event anterior to the current narrative reference point. In Reichenbach's terms, it places E before R, which is itself before S, creating the absolute-relative tense configuration Comrie (1985, pp. 64–82) describes. The effect on text construction is significant: the past perfect *interrupts* the forward chain of the narrative to insert explanatory depth, then yields to simple past to resume the storyline. This capacity for temporal layering is what makes tense a resource for constructing complex, multi-planar discourse rather than a mere time-stamp on individual clauses.

4.2. Macro-level analysis: tense across discourse and genre

At the macro level, tense selections define the temporal architecture of entire texts and serve as reliable genre markers. Biber's (1988, pp. 104–115) multi-dimensional corpus analysis demonstrates that tense is among the most powerful features distinguishing registers: past tense verbs cluster with

fiction and news reporting (narrative-based discourse), while present tense verbs co-occur with informational and involved production. Biber and Gray (2016, pp. 47–62) confirm this finding at greater granularity, showing that grammatical complexity and tense choice co-vary systematically with register demands. In narrative texts, tense operates as an organising skeleton. Simple past constitutes the unmarked “mainline” tense (Longacre, 1996, p. 25), carrying the sequential backbone of the plot. Departures from this baseline perform specific textual functions: the historical present, as Schiffrin (1981, p. 49) demonstrated, marks evaluative peaks within complicating action; past perfect creates analeptic depth; and present-tense commentary signals a shift to the meta-narrative frame. Fleischman (1990, pp. 23–29) captures this through the concept of *markedness reversal*: whereas present tense is unmarked in non-narrative language, narrative constitutes a marked context where past tense becomes the default and all other tenses acquire marked textual functions.

Consider

(4) He *walked* through the market, past the stalls that *had been* there for decades. Suddenly he *stops*. A face in the crowd. He *knows* that face. The shift from *walked* (past, mainline) to *had been* (past perfect, background) to *stops/knows* (historical present, evaluation) is not tense inconsistency but a precisely calibrated sequence of discourse functions. The historical present creates immediacy and marks a turning point; it signals to the reader that this moment is evaluatively significant—a technique Sanders and Van Krieken (2019, pp. 295–298) analyse as viewpoint management, where tense shifts construct distinct mental spaces within the text. In academic texts, tense operates according to a different functional logic, but one no less systematic. The conventions are well documented: present simple asserts established truths and generalisations (“Inequality *grows* in unstable markets”); present perfect reviews literature with ongoing relevance (“Researchers *have demonstrated* that...”); past simple reports specific completed findings (“McMillan *found* that...”). These are not arbitrary conventions but reflect the discourse modes Smith (2003, pp. 105–115) identifies: generalisations operate in Information mode (atemporal present), literature reviews in Report mode (deictic present perfect connecting past research to present relevance), and methodology sections in Narrative mode (past tense sequential account).

Strobbe and Vandenberg (2018, pp. 745–758) provide corpus-based confirmation of precisely this distribution in present-day academic discourse, showing that temporal reference in academic writing is systematically tied to text-structural position.

Consider

(5) Language *is* a social semiotic (Halliday, 1978). Subsequent research *has extended* this insight to multimodal communication. In this study, we *analysed* 200 texts and *found* significant variation across registers. Three tense forms co-occur within a single paragraph, each performing a distinct discursive function: present simple (“*is*”) for established knowledge, present perfect (“*has extended*”) for cumulative scholarly activity with current relevance, and past simple (“*analysed*,” “*found*”) for the specific completed study. The tense shifts are not inconsistent; they are *functionally motivated transitions between discourse modes* within a single text. This observation challenges the prescriptive advice often given to student writers — “maintain tense consistency” — which conflates two different phenomena: unmotivated tense shifts (which produce incoherence) and functionally motivated shifts (which produce textual organisation).

4.3. Tense consistency and motivated tense shifting: a comparative model

The question of tense consistency merits particular analysis because it reveals the tension between sentence-level grammar and discourse-level function. At the sentence level, tense consistency is a cohesive requirement: within a clause complex, tense shifts must be syntactically licensed (through sequence-of-tense rules, temporal adverbials, or logical subordination). Unmotivated shifts produce

processing difficulty and signal textual breakdown. At the discourse level, however, tense shifts are not merely permissible but *necessary* for constructing multi-functional texts.

Table 1 formalises the distinction between motivated and unmotivated tense shifts through four diagnostic criteria, with concrete examples for each.

Table 1
Motivated vs. unmotivated tense shifts: a diagnostic model

Criterion	Motivated Shift	Unmotivated Shift
Discourse function	Serves an identifiable function (grounding, mode transition, viewpoint, evaluation).	Serves no identifiable function; arbitrary alternation.
Reader processing	Aids interpretation; signals an update of temporal/epistemic frame.	Produces processing difficulty; reader cannot recover speaker intent.
Genre alignment	Aligns with genre conventions (e.g., literature review uses present perfect).	Violates genre conventions (e.g., random past/present in academic prose).
Example	"Language is a social semiotic. Researchers have extended this insight. In this study, we analysed 200 texts." (Information → Report → Narrative modes)	"The students worked on the task. They are tired. We collected the data." (no functional reason for tense alternation)

Note. Diagnostic criteria adapted from de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), Smith (2003), and Sanders and Van Krieken (2019).

The analytical distinction, then, is between *unmotivated* tense shifts—which violate cohesion and create incoherence—and *motivated* tense shifts—which serve identifiable discourse functions. De Beaugrande and Dressler's (1981, p. 78) concept of “updating” captures this: a motivated tense shift is an instruction to the reader to update their temporal orientation within the discourse. These transitions function as what Schiffrin (1987, pp. 31–35) calls contextualisation cues, analogous to discourse markers in their capacity to signal shifts between discourse planes. Firbas's (1992, p. 13) communicative dynamism framework provides a further diagnostic: a tense shift carries high communicative dynamism when it introduces a new temporal frame (rhematic function), and low communicative dynamism when it merely maintains an established temporal orientation (thematic function). In example (4) above, the shift to historical present carries high CD because it reorients the reader's temporal and evaluative perspective. In example (5), the present simple “*is*” carries low CD, while the shift to past simple “*analysed*” carries higher CD because it introduces a new temporal and methodological frame.

4.4. Tense and viewpoint management

A final dimension of tense in text construction concerns its role in managing viewpoint and narrative perspective. Sanders and Van Krieken (2019, pp. 300–310) demonstrate how tense shifts in news narratives construct distinct epistemic spaces: a “News Space” anchored in event time (past tense) and a “Reality Space” anchored in the journalist's and reader's here-and-now (present tense). Transitions between these spaces are signalled primarily by tense, making tense a viewpoint-management device. In literary narrative, the same mechanism operates with greater subtlety: free indirect discourse typically maintains past tense while adopting the character's perspective, creating a blended viewpoint that Fleischman (1990, pp. 217–229) analyses as the simultaneous activation of narrative and deictic temporal frames.

This viewpoint function extends beyond narrative. In academic writing, the choice between active past tense (“*we found*”) and passive past tense (“*it was found*”) interacts with tense to manage the degree of authorial presence and epistemic commitment. The timeless present of generalisations (“*syntax governs word order*”) constructs an impersonal, objective viewpoint from which specific

findings are narrated in the past. The architecture is not random but reflects what Martin (1992, p. 502) describes as the genre-specific staging of ideational and interpersonal meanings through the textual metafunction, with tense serving as a primary resource.

Results and Discussion

The analysis yields several findings with implications for discourse theory, text linguistics, and language pedagogy.

First, it confirms the central claim of functional linguistics that tense is not reducible to temporal reference. Across both narrative and academic registers, tense selections perform identifiable discourse functions—grounding, cohesion, viewpoint management, genre signalling—that are independent of, or only loosely related to, the temporal location of events. This is observable in concrete cases. The simple past in narrative discourse advances the storyline (example 2: “*opened ... stepped ... reached*”); the same form in academic discourse locates a finding in a completed study (example 5: “*analysed ... found*”). The present perfect creates current relevance in academic writing (example 5: “*has extended*”); the same form in narrative would interrupt temporal progression. These are not different *meanings* of the same form but different *functions* activated by different discourse contexts, supporting Smith's (2003, pp. 28–32) mode-dependent interpretation of tense.

Second, the analysis demonstrates that tense operates at multiple levels simultaneously, and that adequate description requires attending to all levels. Halliday's metafunctional model captures the clause-level multi-functionality of tense (ideational, interpersonal, textual). Reichenbach's and Klein's reference-point models capture inter-clausal temporal progression. Hopper's and Longacre's grounding frameworks capture discourse-level partitioning. Biber's register analysis captures genre-level distribution. No single framework suffices; the contribution of this article is to show how these frameworks are complementary rather than competing, each illuminating a different stratum of tense's text-constructing function. The micro-level analysis in Section 4.1 demonstrated this complementarity in concrete terms: example (3) required Reichenbach's reference-point model to identify the absolute-relative configuration of past perfect, Hopper's grounding theory to explain why the same form functions as background, and Halliday's metafunctional model to capture its simultaneous contribution to textual cohesion. Removing any one of these frameworks would have left the analysis incomplete.

Third, the distinction between motivated and unmotivated tense shifts (formalised in Table 1) has significant pedagogical implications. The common instruction to “maintain tense consistency” oversimplifies the issue: students need to understand not only *when* to maintain tense but *when and why* to shift it. A genre-based pedagogy informed by Smith's discourse modes and Longacre's salience clines could equip writers with a functional understanding of tense as a meaning-making choice rather than a rule to be mechanically followed. Pérez-Llantada's (2022, pp. 5–10) analysis of complexity and simplicity in academic discourse provides empirical support for such an approach, demonstrating that expert academic writers deploy tense-aspect variation strategically in response to genre constraints. The goal is not consistency *per se* but *motivated consistency*—maintaining tense within a discourse function and shifting tense deliberately when the discourse function changes.

Fourth, the comparison between narrative and academic tense usage reveals that genre is not merely a contextual variable but an active determinant of tense interpretation. The same morphological form acquires different discursive values depending on the genre in which it appears, because genre activates different discourse modes (Smith, 2003), different grounding expectations (Longacre, 1996), and different communicative purposes (Martin, 1992). Thompson's (2014, pp. 87–98) comprehensive account of functional grammar confirms that the textual metafunction—including

tense as a cohesive device—operates genre-dependently rather than as a context-free grammatical rule. This finding aligns with the broader SFL principle that text and context are mutually constitutive: the genre shapes tense choice, and tense choice, in turn, constructs the genre. Flowerdew and Richardson (2018) similarly stress that discourse analysis must attend to genre-specific norms when interpreting grammatical choices, reinforcing the case for a genre-sensitive framework. The emerging framework of tense, aspect, and discourse structure (Egetenmeyer, Dessì Schmid, & Becker, 2024) points toward a productive synthesis in which tense-aspect forms are understood as co-determined by narrative functions at the discourse level.

Conclusion

This article has argued that English verb tenses function as multi-level tools of text construction rather than as mere grammatical markers of temporal reference. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics, discourse grounding theory, text linguistics, and tense–aspect theory, the analysis has demonstrated that tense selections operate simultaneously at the clause level (realising experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings), the inter-clausal level (creating temporal progression through reference-point management), the discourse level (partitioning text into foreground and background, signalling discourse mode, and managing viewpoint), and the genre level (functioning as register markers that distinguish narrative from academic, procedural from expository discourse). The comparison between narrative and academic registers has shown that tense is not a fixed semantic category but a context-sensitive functional resource whose interpretation depends on the discourse mode, genre, and communicative purpose in which it operates. The distinction between motivated and unmotivated tense shifts, formalised in Table 1, provides a principled basis for understanding tense variation in texts: motivated shifts serve identifiable discourse functions (grounding, evaluation, viewpoint management, mode transition), while unmotivated shifts produce incoherence. The functional turn—from tense as grammatical category to tense as text-building resource—represents the field's most significant conceptual shift and offers the strongest foundation for both theoretical understanding and pedagogical application. Future research might extend this framework through large-scale corpus analysis of tense distributions across a wider range of genres, longitudinal studies of how writers develop functional tense competence, and cross-linguistic comparison of how different tense–aspect systems serve parallel text-constructing functions. What is clear from the present analysis is that any account of tense that remains confined to the sentence is fundamentally incomplete: tense is a discourse resource, and it is in discourse that its full functional potential is realised.

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