

Abstract

This thesis investigates advanced Swedish learners' use of tense and aspect in argumentative writing. It deals with the relationship between tense and cohesion/coherence, the frequency of tense and aspect forms in learner and native speaker texts, tense and aspect shifts, and advanced Swedish learners' misuse of tense and aspect.

Harder's (1994, 1996a) theory of tense is used as the theoretical framework. The material is from the Swedish component of the International Corpus of Learner English (SWICLE) and the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS).

Three methods were applied in the investigation, a frequency-based comparison of 44 SWICLE and 44 LOCNESS texts, an informant test investigating the misuse of tense and aspect, and an elicitation experiment comparing learners' and native speakers' use.

The frequency study showed that the present tense is the most common tense form in both learner and native speaker texts. Highly significant differences were found between the learners and the native speakers in their use of all categories except for the progressive. However, since the samples were fairly small, the results were difficult to interpret.

The study shows that tense shifts are fairly frequent in both learner and native speaker texts. It is therefore important to recognise the complexity of tense shifting.

Examples of misuse were found in well-known problem areas for Swedish learners of English. However, the study points to aspects of the problems which are not generally dealt with in the grammar books written for Swedish learners. These include the future frame strategy, the use of the present passive for the present perfect passive, and the tendency to mix past and present perfect tenses. The most frequent error type was the progressive. The investigation suggests that the use of the progressive when writing about generic/habitual and stative situations is especially problematic.

Most of the examples of misuse that were found were interclausal, which means that the surrounding context must be considered before one can say that a form is unnatural. It is therefore argued that there is a need for more context-based grammar teaching, teaching which deals with segments larger than the clause or sentence.

It is also argued that both discourse and grammar must be taken into consideration when evaluating learner misuse. Many errors may be due to the learner's inability to choose a discourse strategy for their texts and to stick to it. It is therefore argued that it may be just as important to develop advanced students' discourse strategic skills as it is to develop their grammatical skills.

Key words: tense, aspect, tense shifts, advanced learners, discourse strategy, corpus, second language acquisition, conditionality, cohesion, coherence, error, informant testing.