

Tense Unmarking in native Karen speakers acquiring the English Tense-Aspect System

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Overview

Big Question: What is the linguistic explanation for English second language learners producing verbs in the present tense when they should be in the past tense?

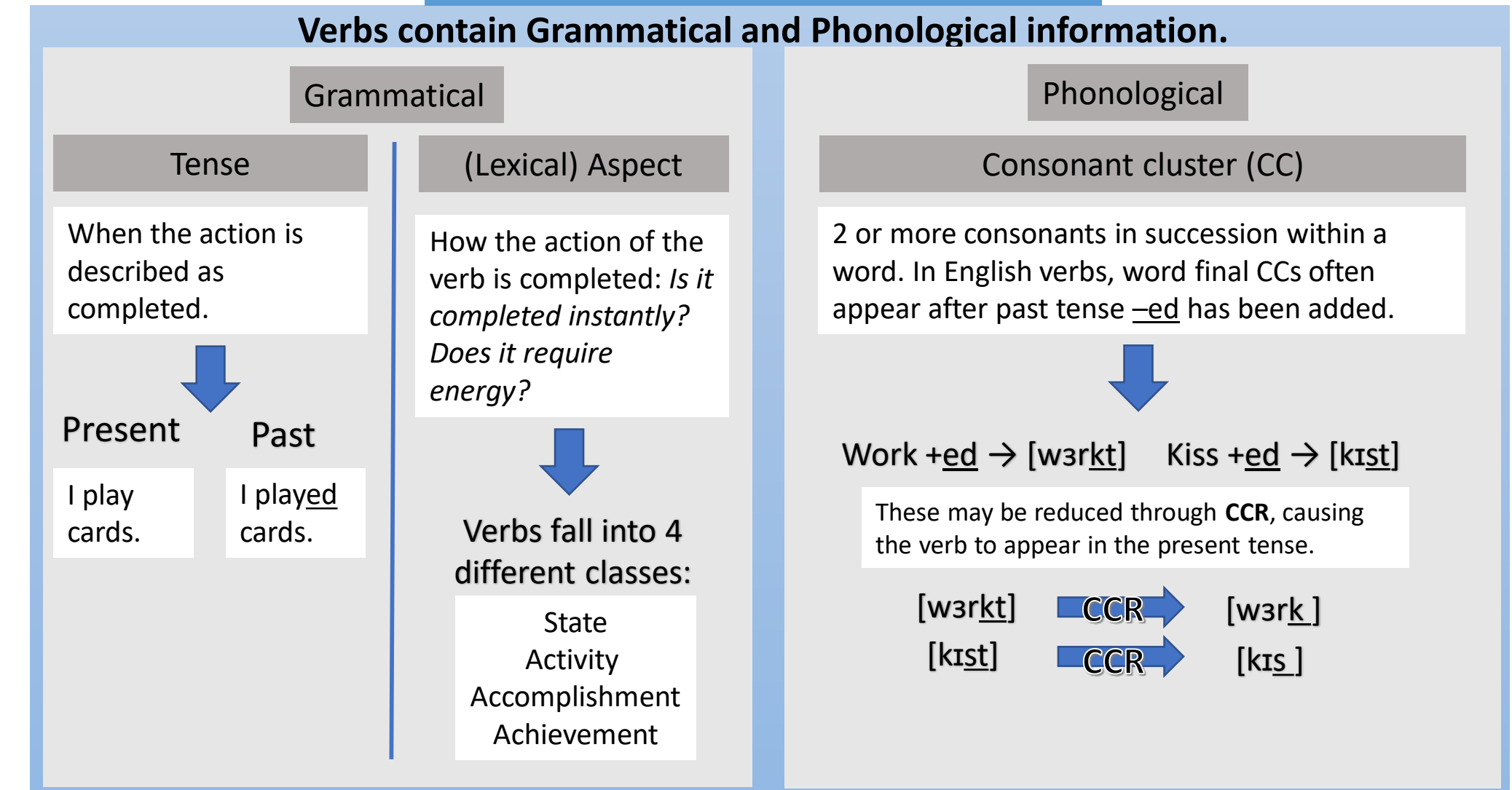
Study: Oral narratives from sociolinguistic interviews of 9 Karen refugees living in North Carolina and learning English as a second language.

Conclusion: The linguistic explanation is two-fold; phonological make-up and inherent verb qualities such as lexical aspect have significant effects on the production of past tense verbs in native Karen speakers learning English.

Literature Review

Study	Population	Contribution	The Main Gap: Tense Unmarking and Consonant Cluster Reduction should be studied with the additional theoretical lens of the Aspect Hypothesis as well as with a recent refugee population whose native language is structurally different from English.
Wolfram & Hatfield (1984)	Vietnamese refugees acquiring English.	Grammatical and phonological processes (i.e. CCR), in that order, are applied resulting in the spoken output.	
Bayley (1996)	Mandarin-English speaking graduate and ESL students.	Both grammatical and phonological processes occur as competing constraints on -t/d deletion.	
Anderson & Shirai (1995)	First and second language learners of English.	The Aspect Hypothesis.	

The Phenomena



Research Question

Do native Karen speakers learning English produce verbs that should be in the past tense in the present tense because of word final consonant clusters and/or verb qualities known as lexical aspect that concern how the action is completed?

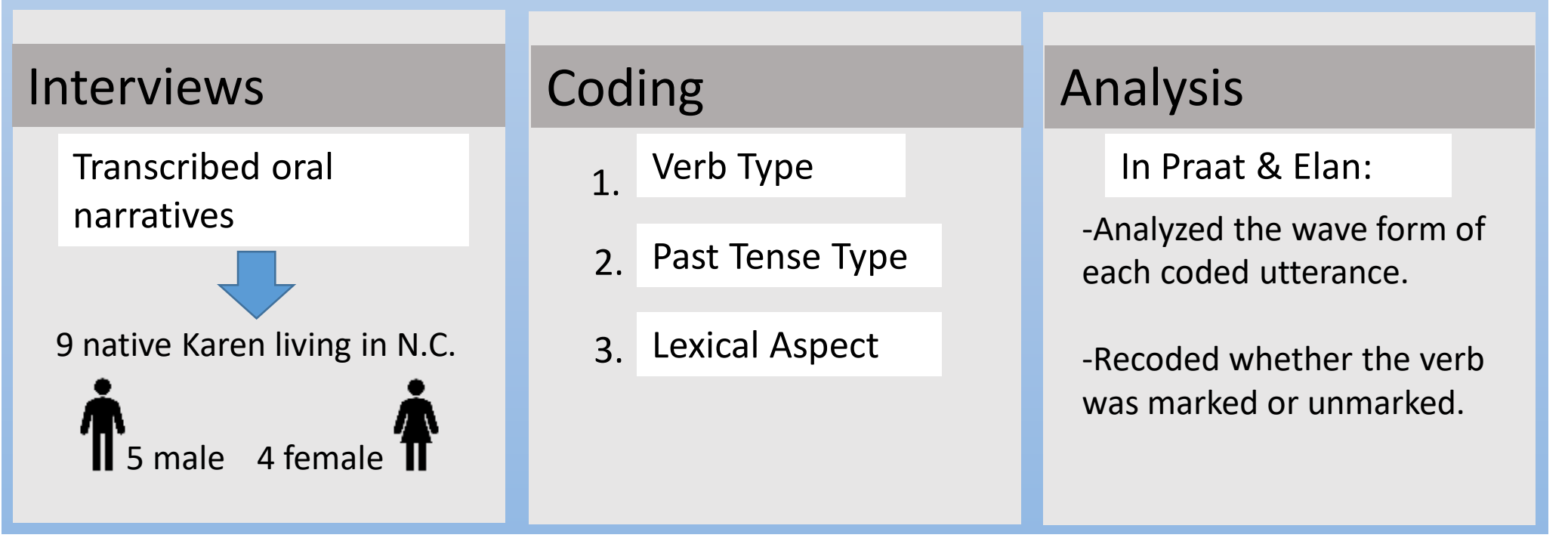
The Karen

Originate from Burma
Became a priority refugee group in 2006 under the Bush Administration.

Their native language is S'gaw Karen
Tibeto-Burman language
Coda clusters are not allowed
Initial clusters are permitted
Tense is not marked overtly on the verb

They began learning English while in refugee camps in Burma
Continued to learn through school and work in the United States.

Methods



Results

Expected results:

Rate of CC and SING unmarked > Rate of FIN and SYLL unmarked > Rate of SUP, DUB, and INT unmarked > Rate of STAT unmarked > Rate of ACH / ACC unmarked

Observed results:

Figure 1. Proportions of Marked versus Unmarked verbs by Verb Type.

Verb Type	Unmarked (%)	Marked (%)
CC	78.94%	21.06%
SING	71.66%	28.33%
FIN	63.49%	36.50%
SYLL	71.42%	28.57%
SUP	41.93%	58.06%
INT	43.85%	56.14%
DUB	22.67%	77.32%

KEY:
CC- creates a consonant cluster
SING- does not create consonant cluster or new syllable
SYLL- creates new syllable
SUP- entire root of verb changes
INT- vowel within verb root changes
DUB- verb root changes and has regular past tense suffix
FIN- final consonant changes

Figure 2. Proportions of Marked versus Unmarked verbs by Lexical Aspect.

Lexical Aspect	Unmarked (%)	Marked (%)
ACH	42.47%	57.52%
ACC	56.23%	43.75%
ACT	70.58%	29.41%
STAT	65.38%	34.61%

KEY:
ACH- Achievement
ACC- Accomplishment
ACT- Activity
STAT- State

Trends by Verb Type:

- CC and SING: higher rates of being unmarked.
- FIN and SYLL: higher rates of being unmarked.
- SUP and INT: higher rates of being marked.
- DUB: higher rates of being marked.

Trends by Lexical Aspect:

- ACH rate of being marked > STAT rate of being marked.
- ACC: high rates of being marked.
- ACT rate of being unmarked > STAT rate of being unmarked.
- STAT: high rates of being unmarked.

Both variables yielded statistically significant p-values in a Pearson Chi-squared test of Independence.

Conclusion

Our results followed the predicted patterns.

Patterns of past tense unmarking are a function of the effects of:

- Inherent semantic qualities of verbs (i.e. lexical aspect)
- Phonological shape of a verb when marked for tense (i.e. verb type)

Results are consistent with hypothesis formed based on previous literature on:

- The Aspect Hypothesis
- Consonant Cluster Reduction

Implications & Further Research

Our Research Mattered Because We:

- Attempted to update older theoretical models in linguistics.
- Utilized data from an understudied language population.
- Recognized the implications related to the sociological reality of being a refugee and learning a second language.

Future Research Should:

- Include socioeconomic factors into their analysis.
- Use a larger set of data for analysis.
- Continue to exhibit commitment to understanding the refugee's experience in America.

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