

Examining Tense Shifts and Narrative Coherence across Literary, Academic, and Journalistic Genres: A Discourse-Analytic Study

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Abstract

Tense shifts are an essential feature of narrative discourse because they help writers organize events, establish temporal relationships, and guide readers through the development of a text. While English tense has been widely examined from grammatical and semantic perspectives, relatively few studies have explored how tense shifts contribute to narrative coherence across different genres. This study investigates the functions of tense shifts in literary, academic, and journalistic texts and examines how they influence readers' understanding of temporal relationships and the overall coherence of a narrative. A qualitative research design was adopted, combining discourse analysis of twenty purposively selected English-language texts with a reader-response survey involving twenty English-proficient participants. The analysis identified the most common patterns of tense shifting and examined how these patterns affected temporal organization, textual clarity, and reader engagement. The findings suggest that carefully managed tense shifts, particularly transitions from the past simple to the past perfect and the selective use of the present tense within predominantly past-tense narratives, make the sequence of events easier to follow and strengthen narrative coherence. In contrast, tense changes that are not supported by clear contextual cues may interrupt the flow of the narrative and increase the effort required for interpretation. The study shows that effective tense management functions not only as a grammatical feature but also as an important discourse strategy that supports clear and coherent communication across different genres. These findings provide useful insights for writers, educators, editors, and translators while contributing to ongoing research in discourse analysis and narrative studies.

Keywords: *tense shifts, narrative coherence, reader comprehension, literary texts, academic writing, discourse analysis*

Introduction

Tense is an essential part of language because it enables writers to place events in time and guide readers through the development of a text. In narrative writing, however, its function goes beyond expressing when an event happens. Changes in tense help readers recognise shifts

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in time, follow the sequence of events, distinguish between the main storyline and background information, and interpret changes in narrative perspective. For this reason, effective tense use contributes not only to grammatical accuracy but also to the overall coherence and readability of a text.

The relationship between tense and discourse has long attracted the attention of linguists. Early studies mainly examined tense as a grammatical system that expresses temporal meaning, while later research began to explore its role in creating cohesion and organising discourse (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). More recently, Ahmed and Mohammed (2025) argued that tense functions as an important grammatical cohesive device because it helps readers connect events and maintain continuity throughout a narrative. These studies demonstrate that tense is not simply a grammatical category but an important element in the organisation of written discourse.

Researchers working in narrative linguistics have also shown that writers use tense shifts for a variety of communicative purposes. A change in tense may introduce a flashback, highlight a key event, and signal a change in narrative perspective, or separate background information from the main sequence of events (Labov, 1972; Fludernik, 2003; Verhagen, 2019). From a cognitive perspective, readers rely on these grammatical signals to build a coherent understanding of a text and to reconstruct the temporal order of events as they read (Ellis, 1987; Speer & Zacks, 2005). Rather than processing individual sentences independently, readers interpret narratives by connecting linguistic cues into a meaningful whole (Bruner, 1991; Herman, 2009).

Although considerable attention has been paid to English tense systems, relatively little research has compared the role of tense shifts across different genres. Most previous studies have focused either on grammatical descriptions of tense or on narrative processing in a single type of text. As a result, there is still limited understanding of how tense shifts function in literary, academic, and journalistic writing and how these differences influence narrative coherence and reader comprehension. Examining these genres together provides a broader picture of how writers adapt tense choices to different communicative purposes.

This study seeks to address that gap by examining the role of tense shifts in literary, academic, and journalistic texts. It combines qualitative discourse analysis with a reader-response survey to investigate not only how tense shifts are used but also how they are perceived by readers. Bringing together these two sources of evidence makes it possible to relate linguistic analysis to readers' actual experiences of interpreting a text.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of tense shifts occur most frequently in literary, academic, and journalistic texts?
2. How do these tense shifts contribute to narrative coherence and the organisation of temporal relationships?



3. How do readers perceive the effect of tense shifts on textual clarity and comprehension?
4. What practical implications do the findings have for writers, educators, translators, and editors?

By examining tense shifts from both linguistic and reader-oriented perspectives, this study contributes to current research on discourse analysis and narrative linguistics. It also highlights the importance of purposeful tense management as a means of producing clear, coherent, and effective written communication across different genres.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to investigate how tense shifts contribute to narrative coherence across different genres and how they influence readers' interpretation of texts. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the aim was not to measure the frequency of tense forms but to explore their communicative functions within authentic discourse. To obtain a broader understanding of the phenomenon, the discourse analysis was complemented by a reader-response survey.

The research corpus consisted of twenty English-language texts selected through purposive sampling. The texts were collected from publicly available online sources, including literary websites, academic publications, and news websites. The corpus comprised seven literary texts, seven academic texts, and six journalistic texts. These genres were deliberately chosen because they represent different communicative purposes and display different patterns of tense use. Literary texts often employ tense variation to construct narrative perspective and represent different time frames, academic texts generally maintain more stable tense patterns while shifting tense to distinguish previous research from current discussion, and journalistic texts frequently combine past and present tenses when reporting events and providing background information.

The texts were selected by the researcher according to two criteria. First, they contained identifiable examples of tense shifts that were relevant to the objectives of the study. Second, they represented authentic examples of written English from different genres. The purpose of the sampling strategy was not to obtain statistically representative data but to examine a range of naturally occurring examples that could provide meaningful insight into the discourse functions of tense shifts.

The analysis was conducted in several stages using a predefined coding framework developed for this study. Each text was read carefully to identify all instances of tense shifting. The identified examples were then classified according to the type of tense shift, its position within the text, its communicative function, and its contribution to narrative coherence. Particular attention was paid to shifts from the past simple to the past perfect, transitions between the past and the present, and shifts involving future reference. Each example was examined to determine



whether the tense change clarified temporal relationships, emphasized important events, created narrative immediacy, or disrupted the logical sequence of the text.

The analytical framework was informed by previous studies on discourse analysis, cohesion, and narrative communication, particularly the work of Halliday and Hasan (1976), Portero Muñoz (2018), and Verhagen (2019). These studies provided the theoretical foundation for identifying different types of tense shifts and interpreting their functions within narrative discourse. Throughout the analysis, the same coding criteria were applied consistently to all twenty texts to ensure a systematic and comparable examination of the data.

To complement the discourse analysis, a reader-response survey was conducted with twenty undergraduate students enrolled in the English–Azerbaijani Translation programme at Nakhchivan State University. The participants were selected because they possessed sufficient English language proficiency to identify tense changes and evaluate their effect on textual coherence. Participation in the survey was voluntary.

The survey was administered in the form of a printed questionnaire. Participants were asked to read several short passages containing different patterns of tense use. After reading each passage, they identified any noticeable tense shifts, evaluated the clarity of the text using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very unclear" to "very clear," and provided brief written comments explaining how the tense patterns affected their understanding of the narrative. These qualitative comments offered additional insight into readers' perceptions of temporal organization and textual coherence.

The findings from the discourse analysis and the reader-response survey were interpreted together. While the textual analysis identified the communicative functions of tense shifts across the three genres, the survey data provided evidence of how readers perceived and interpreted these patterns. Combining the two sources of data allowed the study to compare linguistic observations with readers' experiences and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between tense management and narrative coherence.

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their participation was entirely voluntary. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were treated anonymously and used solely for academic research purposes.

Results

The analysis showed that tense shifts occurred in all three genres included in the corpus: literary, academic, and journalistic texts. Although all genres employed tense variation, the frequency and communicative functions of these shifts differed according to the purpose of the text. Literary texts contained the greatest variety of tense shifts, while academic writing generally



followed more stable tense patterns. Journalistic texts displayed characteristics of both genres by combining narrative reporting with references to current events.

Among the twenty texts analysed, four main types of tense shifts were identified: Past Simple → Past Perfect, Past → Present, Present → Past, and shifts involving future reference. The most frequent pattern was the transition from the past simple to the past perfect, which was commonly used to introduce background information or events that had occurred before the main narrative. Shifts from the past to the present were observed mainly in literary and journalistic texts, where they increased the sense of immediacy and drew attention to significant moments. In academic writing, present-to-past shifts most often occurred when authors moved from discussing general knowledge to describing previous studies or completed research.

Table 1.

Types of tense shifts identified in the corpus

Type of tense shift	Typical function	Observed effect on coherence
Past Simple → Past Perfect	Introducing earlier events or flashbacks	Clarified temporal relationships and improved chronological understanding
Past → Present	Creating immediacy and highlighting important events	Increased reader engagement when supported by contextual cues
Present → Past	Returning to completed events or reporting previous research	Maintained logical progression and distinguished different time frames
Future reference	Referring to expected or planned events	Helped readers anticipate later developments

The examples identified in the corpus demonstrated that the contribution of tense shifts to narrative coherence depended largely on the surrounding context. When a tense shift was clearly motivated, readers were able to recognise changes in time without difficulty. However, tense changes that occurred without sufficient contextual support occasionally interrupted the flow of the narrative.

For example, one literary text contained the following sequence:

Sarah arrived at the station ten minutes late. The train had already left, so she had to wait for the next departure.



The transition from the past simple to the past perfect clearly established that the train departed before Sarah arrived. This pattern appeared frequently in literary narratives and consistently clarified the chronological relationship between events.

Another literary example illustrated a shift from the past to the present:

The detective entered the abandoned house. As he reaches the final room, he notices a small envelope on the floor.

Here, the present tense created a greater sense of immediacy, encouraging readers to experience the events as they unfolded. Similar examples appeared in several literary narratives included in the corpus.

A different pattern was found in academic writing:

Many historians argue that the treaty represents a turning point in European diplomacy. However, it was signed only after several months of negotiation.

In this case, the present tense introduced generally accepted knowledge, whereas the past tense referred to a completed historical event. This distinction enabled the text to separate interpretation from factual description.

The analysis also revealed noticeable differences among the three genres.

Table 2.

Distribution of dominant tense-shift patterns across genres

Genre	Most frequent tense shift	Primary discourse function
Literary	Past → Present	Creating immediacy and narrative involvement
Academic	Present → Past	Distinguishing general knowledge from completed research or historical facts
Journalistic	Past → Present	Connecting previous events with current developments

Literary texts displayed the greatest flexibility in tense use, frequently shifting between time frames to develop the narrative and provide background information. Academic texts were generally more consistent, with tense shifts serving specific organisational purposes. Journalistic texts combined characteristics of both genres by linking past events with present circumstances, allowing readers to understand both the background and the current relevance of reported events.

The reader-response survey produced findings that closely reflected the results of the textual analysis. Most participants reported that purposeful tense shifts made narratives easier to



follow, particularly when they clearly indicated changes in the sequence of events. Participants also associated consistent tense usage with greater textual clarity, whereas abrupt or unexplained tense changes occasionally caused confusion.

Table 3.

Reader-response survey results (n = 20)

Survey statement	Percentage of participants
Purposeful tense shifts improved understanding of event sequences	85%
Consistent tense usage made texts easier to follow	70%
Abrupt or unexplained tense shifts caused temporary confusion	60%

Seventeen of the twenty participants stated that well-signalled tense shifts helped them recognise changes in the timeline more easily. Fourteen participants considered consistent tense usage an important factor contributing to textual clarity, while twelve reported that unexpected tense changes occasionally interrupted their reading process and required them to reread parts of the text. The written comments reflected similar views. Several participants noted that tense shifts were particularly helpful when introducing flashbacks or signalling a change in narrative perspective, whereas unexplained tense changes sometimes made it more difficult to determine the order of events.

Taken together, the textual analysis and the survey findings indicate that tense shifts contribute positively to narrative coherence when they are used consistently and supported by appropriate contextual cues. Across all three genres, readers generally interpreted well-managed tense variation as a useful guide for understanding temporal relationships and following the progression of a text.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how tense shifts contribute to narrative coherence in literary, academic, and journalistic texts. By combining discourse analysis with readers' responses, the study considered not only how tense shifts function within texts but also how they are interpreted during the reading process. Looking at these two perspectives together provides a more complete understanding of the role of tense in discourse than analysing grammatical forms alone.

The findings suggest that tense shifts are most effective when they serve a clear communicative purpose. Across the texts analysed, tense changes were rarely random. Instead,



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they were used to organise the sequence of events, distinguish different time frames, and guide readers through the development of the narrative. This observation supports the view that tense should be understood as a discourse resource rather than simply as a grammatical category. In this respect, the findings are consistent with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) description of cohesion as a mechanism that helps connect ideas throughout a text and with Ahmed and Mohammed's (2025) argument that tense contributes to textual continuity.

One of the most noticeable patterns in the corpus was the frequent shift from the past simple to the past perfect. In almost every case, this change helped introduce information that had occurred before the main storyline. Rather than interrupting the narrative, these shifts clarified the order of events and reduced the possibility of misunderstanding. Readers in the survey also recognised this function, as many reported that such shifts made it easier to identify flashbacks and understand the relationship between earlier and later events. This suggests that tense choices influence not only the grammatical structure of a text but also the way readers construct its temporal organisation.

The analysis also highlighted clear differences between genres. Literary texts showed the greatest flexibility because authors frequently moved between different time frames to develop the plot, reveal background information, or create dramatic effect. Journalistic writing used tense shifts more selectively, often linking previous events with ongoing situations to emphasise the relevance of current news. Academic writing, on the other hand, generally maintained greater tense consistency. When shifts occurred, they usually reflected changes between established knowledge, previous research, and the author's own contribution. These differences indicate that tense usage is shaped by the communicative purpose of a genre rather than by fixed grammatical rules.

The reader-response survey adds an important dimension to these findings. While the discourse analysis demonstrated how tense shifts function within texts, the survey showed how readers actually respond to them. Most participants reported that they had little difficulty following passages in which tense shifts were clearly motivated and supported by contextual information. Difficulties arose mainly when tense changed without an obvious reason or without sufficient textual signals. These responses suggest that readers do not simply notice grammatical forms; instead, they use tense as one of the cues that helps them organise information and interpret the progression of events. This observation is in line with cognitive research indicating that temporal markers play an important role in discourse processing (Ellis, 1987; Speer & Zacks, 2005).

The examples analysed in this study further illustrate that the effectiveness of tense shifts depends on context. The same grammatical pattern may contribute to coherence in one situation but create confusion in another if readers are not provided with enough contextual support.



Consequently, successful tense management involves making choices that are appropriate for the purpose of the text and the expectations of its intended audience. This finding reinforces Verhagen's (2019) argument that tense shifting is closely connected with changes in viewpoint and narrative communication rather than with grammar alone.

The study also has practical implications. For writers, the findings highlight the importance of using tense consistently while allowing purposeful variation when changes in time or perspective need to be expressed. For teachers of English and translation, the results suggest that tense should be taught not only as a grammatical system but also as a discourse strategy that contributes to coherence. Editors and translators may likewise benefit from paying closer attention to tense patterns, particularly when revising texts that contain multiple timelines or complex narrative structures. Greater awareness of these functions may improve both the clarity and the readability of written communication.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study analysed a relatively small corpus consisting of twenty texts and included responses from twenty students enrolled in the English–Azerbaijani Translation programme at Nakhchivan State University. Although these data provided valuable insights, they do not represent all genres, educational backgrounds, or language users. In addition, the analysis focused exclusively on English-language texts, and the findings cannot automatically be extended to languages with different tense systems or narrative conventions.

These limitations also point to opportunities for future research. Studies based on larger corpora could examine whether similar patterns appear in other forms of discourse, including digital media, spoken narratives, and multilingual texts. Comparative research across languages would help determine whether the relationship between tense shifts and narrative coherence is language-specific or reflects broader discourse principles. Experimental methods, such as eye-tracking or reading-time analysis, could also provide further evidence of how readers process tense shifts during real-time comprehension.

Overall, the findings indicate that tense shifts are far more than grammatical choices. They play an important role in structuring discourse, organising temporal relationships, and supporting reader interpretation. When used purposefully and supported by appropriate contextual cues, tense shifts enhance narrative coherence and make texts easier to understand across a range of genres. The combination of discourse analysis and reader-response evidence provides a broader perspective on these functions and demonstrates that effective tense management is an essential component of successful written communication.



Conclusion

This study examined the role of tense shifts in narrative coherence across literary, academic, and journalistic texts. By combining qualitative discourse analysis with a reader-response survey, it explored both the linguistic functions of tense shifts and readers' perceptions of their contribution to textual coherence. The findings demonstrate that tense shifts are not merely grammatical features used to indicate time; they also serve as important discourse resources that help organise events, clarify temporal relationships, and support readers' understanding of a narrative.

The analysis showed that different genres employ tense shifts in different ways. Literary texts used tense variation to create narrative depth, introduce changes in perspective, and increase reader involvement. Academic texts generally maintained more stable tense patterns, using shifts primarily to distinguish established knowledge from completed research or historical events. Journalistic texts combined features of both genres by linking past events with current developments, enabling readers to understand the relationship between background information and ongoing news.

The reader-response survey further indicated that purposeful and well-signalled tense shifts contributed positively to textual clarity and made narratives easier to follow. In contrast, abrupt or unmotivated tense changes occasionally interrupted the reading process and reduced the transparency of temporal relationships. These findings emphasise that effective tense management depends not only on grammatical accuracy but also on the writer's ability to use tense strategically within the broader context of discourse.

The study contributes to current research on discourse analysis and narrative linguistics by demonstrating how tense shifts function across different genres and by combining textual analysis with evidence from readers. In addition, the findings have practical value for writers, educators, translators, and editors who seek to produce coherent and accessible texts. Greater awareness of discourse-level tense usage may also support the development of more effective writing and translation practices.

Although the study was based on a relatively small corpus and a limited group of participants, it provides a useful starting point for further research. Future studies involving larger corpora, additional genres, and cross-linguistic comparisons could offer a broader understanding of how tense variation shapes discourse across different communicative contexts. Such research would not only advance theoretical knowledge in discourse analysis and narrative linguistics but also support more effective writing, language teaching, editing, and translation practices.

Declarations



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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

Participation in the reader-response survey was voluntary. Before completing the questionnaire, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and agreed to take part. The survey was anonymous, and the responses were used solely for academic research.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence tools were used only to improve the language and readability of the manuscript during language revision and proofreading. All aspects of the study, including the research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of the findings, and the final version of the manuscript, were carried out and approved by the author.

Author Contributions

Birgul Asadova was responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, literature review, drafting of the manuscript, and revision of the final version.

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