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RIVISTA DI FILOLOGIA E ALTRA MEDIEVALISTICA



3/2 - 2019

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Medioevo Europeo is an International Peer-Reviewed Journal

ISSN 2532-6856

Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Studi Interculturali
Via Santa Reparata, 93 - 50129 Firenze
redazione@medioevoeuropeo-uniupo.com

Libreria Editrice Alfani SNC, Via Degli Alfani 84/R, 50121 Firenze

progetto grafico: Gabriele Albertini
impaginazione e layout: Luciano Zella

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Time management in Middle English Romances

ABSTRACT: This paper analyses the ways in which time is linguistically expressed in some Middle English romances in verse and prose. In this narrative genre, the linguistic signals concerning time are naturally quite prominent, in order to follow events taking place over timespans that, in some cases, can be quite extensive. The chronological sequence of events is however also manipulated, occasionally offering flash-back and flash-forward effects. Moreover, there are frequent “anchoring” effects, when the actions of the characters are explicitly reported to take place at a specific moment in time.

The paper pursues this topic with two main objectives: to verify, within the limits of the sample, the expressive cohesion within the genre and to look at time deixis from a pragmatic perspective, i.e. in terms of implicature generation in the audience. These aims spring from the frequent claims in previous literature about the reliance of romances on fixed and formulaic expressions, which entail a high degree of intertextuality and therefore substantial reliance on the audience’s competence more in terms of memory than of local inference. The results seem to partly confirm these claims and to point to a relative consistency between verse and prose in the expression of time deixis.

ABSTRACT: In questo articolo si analizzano le strategie linguistiche attraverso le quali vengono espresse nozioni di tempo e aspetto in alcuni romance medio inglesi in versi e in prosa. In questo genere narrativo, i segnali linguistici che riguardano l’espressione del tempo sono naturalmente importanti, in quanto permettono di seguire la successione degli eventi che si svolgono su periodi di tempo talvolta piuttosto estesi. Tuttavia, la sequenza cronologica degli eventi viene spesso alterata mediante effetti narrativi quali flash-back e flash-forward. Inoltre, frequenti sono gli effetti di “ancoraggio”, quando si fa riferimento esplicito al momento specifico in cui avvengono le azioni dei personaggi.

In questo articolo si affronta questo tema con due obiettivi principali: verificare, entro i limiti del campione, la coesione narrativa all’interno del genere e investigare la deissi temporale da una prospettiva pragmatica, vale a dire in termini di implicature generate e di inferenze del ricevente. Nella letteratura scientifica, infatti, si ritiene che il romance si affidi molto ad espressioni fisse e formulaiche, che comportano un alto grado di intertestualità e conseguentemente una sostanziale dipendenza dalla competenza del pubblico più in termini di memoria che di inferenza “ad hoc”. I risultati sembrano confermare in parte queste affermazioni e indicare una relativa coerenza tra versi e prosa nell’espressione della deissi temporale.

KEYWORDS: Romances, Middle English, Time deixis, Pragmatics, Narrative

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Romance, Inglese medio, Deissi temporale, Pragmatica, Narrazione

1. Introduction

The present paper starts from previous explorative work (Mazzon 2019) to investigate the use of time deixis in some Middle English romances. One first aim of the paper is to look at the ways in which romances employ time-reference expressions to encode and to manipulate time sequences in the narratives, in order to verify how far consistency in time deixis contributes to the general cohesion of the genre. A secondary aim is to look at these items encoding temporal deixis under a pragmatic, communicative perspective. Although the ways in which romances deal with the expression of time has been studied before, these studies have mostly been carried out under perspectives mostly within literary criticism and narrative analysis, rather than from a strictly linguistic perspective. The present work moves within a pragmatic approach, taking into account the presuppositions and implicatures created by uses of time deixis.

In order to gain some insight into different aspects of this text-type, a sample of Middle English romances was selected. These show a relatively high thematic unity (i.e. the process of *Bildung* of a main character) and narrate events that cover wide timespans. The material chosen comes from different traditions (for further details on the sample see Table 1); with one exception (the so-called *Prose Merlin*), only romances in verse were selected, although no alliterative texts were included, as this was felt to potentially skew the sample too much. Of course, this limitation could concern texts in verse in general, given the constraints imposed by metrical schemes. Our results, however, will indicate that there is no substantial difference between verse and prose in terms of choice of items, or extent of temporal specification, and therefore, with one exception that will be mentioned later, we can discount the influence of verse patterns in this study.

Title	Date	Provenance	Verse/prose	Abbreviation
<i>King Horn</i>	ca. 1250	Southern dialect with midland forms	verse	<i>KH</i>
<i>Floris and Blancheflour</i>	ca. 1250	South-east Midlands	verse	<i>FB</i>
<i>Havelock the Dane</i>	ca. 1280-1290	Northeast Midlands	verse	<i>HD</i>
<i>Lai La Fresne (Lay le Freine)</i>	ca. 1300	South East	verse	<i>LLF</i>
<i>Sir Orfeo</i>	early 14 th century	Westminster-Middlesex area	verse	<i>SO</i>
<i>Athelston</i>	ca. 1360	North Midlands?	verse	<i>A</i>
<i>Gamelyn</i>	1350-70	Northeast Midlands	verse	<i>G</i>

<i>Sir Launfal</i>	late 14 th century	Southeast England	verse	<i>SL</i>
<i>The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell</i>	ca. 1450	uncertain	verse	<i>WSGDR</i>
<i>The Squire of Low Degree</i>	ca. 1500	East Midlands	verse	<i>SLD</i>
<i>Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle</i>	ca. 1530	uncertain	verse	<i>GCC</i>
<i>Prose Merlin</i>	mid-15 th century	uncertain	prose	<i>PM</i>

Table 1. Sample of Middle English romances employed.

Although the examples will be quoted, for ease of reference, from electronic databases (see References - Primary Sources) the analysis was performed manually through a close reading of each text, in order to capture a variety of expressions and to take the immediate linguistic context in due consideration.

Some general remarks and a brief (and by no means exhaustive) review of previous studies on this topic are offered in Section 2, while Sections 3 and 4 present the typology of time deictics drawn from the sample. Section 5 offers some tentative answers to the two research questions that were mentioned above as aims of the paper.

2. Narrative units and sequences

The narrative structure of Middle English romances has been abundantly studied within structuralist approaches in the 1970s and 1980s (Wittig 1978; Evans 1986), with the aim of identifying the units typically composing a romance. The development of studies investigating the relation between orality and literacy has encouraged the production of further research on episodic structures and on the use of repetition to increase internal cohesion (Holland 1973; Evans 1986: 130; Reichl 2009). Given the density of the plots, the delimitation of the episodes (Mehl 1968: 22) is highly marked, but the chronological sequence is often manipulated – Green (2002), Putter (2004) and Pearsall (2011) are a few of the scholars that have studied the various recappings, flash-backs and flash-forwards of the narrative. Whole years can be subsumed in a few lines, as in a “fast-forward” motion, or single moments can receive very detailed accounts, as if seen in “slow-motion”, as will be exemplified in 4.2. below. At the same time, there is a tendency to mix the linear structure of narrative with the circular or spiral structure of oral literature (Mills et alii 1999: 181). This offers an opportunity to look at the ways in which temporal deixis is exploited in these texts (Mazzon 2019).

When studying narrative sequencing and topic management, it is quite important to separate the two planes of narrative and meta-narrative portions (or diegetic and extra-diegetic, in narratologic terms), since topic management is often entrusted to explicit narrator intervention, and there are frequent appearances of the narrator in the first person *I* referring to the *you* of the “audience”. It is clear, when analysing such portions of romances, that the use of temporal deixis is functional to both connecting and separating these planes, by creating a redoubled possibility of “here and now” vs “there and then”, as mentioned in 3.2. and 4.2. below.

Although the use of time deixis in romances cannot be taken to represent any form of “spoken” usage, it is possible to analyse this text-type to look for the conventions it employs, assuming that they meant something to the (listening or reading) audience, and helped making sense of the sequences of events involved and of the ways in which these were manipulated in the narrative. In this context, we can assume that the genre developed its own conventions in relation to the indication of time sequences, in spite of romances being influenced by such diverse genres as chronicles, epic poems and folk tales.¹

In terms of such genre-specific conventions, it must be noted that Pochoda (1971: 65) many years ago already emphasised the fact that several English romances employ different strategies from the French ones, which, in spite of the numerous interpolations in the *ordo naturalis*, do not highlight the advancement of time. Although French romances provided models for the composition of the English ones, both directly and indirectly, this model is not always followed, in the treatment of time as well as in other aspects. Putter (2004: 174-185) also notes differences at the micro-level, especially in the extra-diegetic parts, with the specification that many English romances use the metric unit of the *fitt* to delimit time units in many cases. On the contrary, other sources were influential, such as chronicles in verse like the *Brut* (Keiser 1974: 130). Similar observations have been made more recently by Spearing (2005: 40-1) about the use of tenses, as English romances follow less strictly the high coherence of French narratives, and alternate preterit and perfect, while they show variable use of the historic present only as from the mid-fourteenth century onwards.

As in the case of other genres imported from other traditions (e.g. hagiography), the English tradition shows a relatively high degree of originality in its expressive means, and does not shy from reworking its sources to adapt them to the needs of an English-speaking audience. The extent to which this tradition shows a consistent and homogeneous treatment of time is explored in the next two sections.

¹ On the *ordo narrationis* in early romances see Green (2002: 96-100), who notes how Horace’s conception of an *ordo artificialis* as typical of poetry survived into the Middle Ages and influenced romances and other fictional genres.

3. Marking time

Barefield (2003: 3) argues that medieval narratives tend, in general, to be more paratactic than modern ones, as parataxis is «a marker of oral culture, with subordination marking more advanced, more literate and analytical ways of arranging and thinking about material». Parataxis, often without explicit connectives, may have required more gap-filling and meaning-making in medieval readers than what is necessary today, something that must be kept in mind when analysing time sequences in romances (id.: 5). This type of asyndetic, implicit marking of time is not analysed in depth in the present work, since we focus on explicit time deixis; we will start from syndetic coordination and subordination, as well as from time adverbials that are often used in our sample, leaving the other main system of time marking, i.e. that involving verb forms, to the next section.

3.1. *Linkers.*

Linkers hold a significant role among the time deictics employed in romances. For instance, the transitional formulae employed to move from one episode to the other or for topic shifting employ linkers to this aim, primarily *and*, but also *now*, in its function of textual marker, e.g. *now leve we X and turn we to Y*, which is in line with the use of this marker in other text-types of the same time (Mazzon 2012). This type of formula is typical of romances in which the “personal” relation with the audience is stressed, while impersonal formulae like *hit befelle* or *so uppon a day* are more typical of romances more directly inspired by folk-tales (Sanders 1987: 27-40); both types are relatively frequent in our sample.

Apart from the use of *and*, in which the implicature of temporal consecution (Ariel 2008: 71 ff.) is frequently exploited, as in examples (1, 2), also very frequent is the more explicit *then*, which indicates a succession of events directly (3, 4) or, in some cases, a form of simultaneity of the type *when... then* (5). It must be noted that *thanne*, especially in older romances such as *HD* and *KH*, is often used for *when*, in a way that is reminiscent of Old English *þa* (6) – these instances have been counted as cases of *when*-clauses of the type examined in 4.2.1.

- (1) In the orchard to the Quen hie come
And her up in her armes nome
And brought hir to bed ate last
And held hir there fine fast (*SO*, 91–94)²

² In all examples, the items on which the analysis focusses are in italics. Line numbers follow the numbering in the database quoted under Primary Sources.

- (2) *And* as the kyng Loth was in this affray, he dede awake *and* hym blisshed *and* was sore abaissed of this dreame that he was in; *and* [he] aroos *and* apareiled hym *and* yede to his felowes *and* hem dide awake and tolde hem his avision. *And* thei asked hym fro whiche part com the water; *and* he seide from the foreste com all the rage and the tempeste, as hym semed. *And* thei seide... (*PM, The Battle of Bredigan Forest*, 13–17)
- (3) *Thanne* that eerl made hym glade (*A*, 723)
- (4) *Than* she told how hire suster come to hir howse (*PM, The Birth of Merlin*, 140)
- (5) *Thanne* he comen there *thanne* was Grim ded (*HD*, 1204)
- (6) *Thanne* he *haveden swor* this oth,
Ne *leten* he nouth, for lef ne loth,
That he ne foren swathe rathe (*HD*, 2378–80)

Among the subordinators, *ere/before* and *after* are occasionally used in linking actions in a time sequence (7, 8), but they appear quite rarely, since successions or series of actions tend to be connected through *and* or *then* both in verse and in prose; therefore, there is a preference for a more linear structure, which reduces the burden of receiver inference.

- (1) The Kyng *folowyd* fulle fast.
Anon the Kyng bothe ferce and felle
Was with the dere and *dyd* hym serve welle,
And *after* the grasse he *taste*. (*WSGDR*, 45–48)
- (2) “But *er* thow go, do garnysse thy forteresses” (*PM, The Baron’s Revolt*, 52)

3.2. Time proximity.

Other items are also very prominent in the indication of sequences: the most frequent are *soon* and *anon*. Usually they appear with the preterit or narrative present tense (9, 10), to indicate punctual actions within a sequence (the swift successions of actions called “bead-chain” structures by Kissam [1977: 40]) – both are more frequent in poetry than in prose in our sample (respectively, ca. 20 to 1 tokens for *soon* and 4 to 1 for *anon*).

- (3) With them Le Codre away did wend
And *sonne* was spousyd with game and gle (*LLF*, 404–5)
- (4) And *anon* as he was deed and under grass y-grave
Sone the elder brother giled the Yonge knave (*G*, 69–70)

This difference in frequency could be hypothesised to be an effect of metrical constraints determining a preference for these short, though less specific, time-lapse indications in poetry, while the narrative in prose could exploit the lack of such constraints to signal such proximal time differently. The strategies chosen in prose are, however, not necessarily more expansive, as the *PM* shows abundant use of *and* to indicate rapid

succession, as will also be seen in the next section. On the other hand, *PM* is rich in expressions of near-simultaneity such as the linker *as* or the locution *with that* – the latter is usually in initial position and triggers S – V inversion (11). Thus, this work in prose seems to distinguish between “succession” and “rapid succession” of events more frequently, with a special focus on near-simultaneity, which does not emerge as a special category in the verse sample. However, the present-day most common indicator of near-simultaneity, i.e. the progressive, is still quite rare in romances – our sample did yield sporadic examples, though, as (12) and (13); continuative actions are treated in other ways, as the next sub-section clarifies.

- (5) *With that com the geauntes and the sarazins and smote theire speres... (PM, Arthur at Tamelide, 121)*
- (6) *Whil Gamelyn was coming... ther the justice sat (G, 799)*
- (7) *Thei passeden through a feelde beside a town wherein were grete plenté of children that therin were pleyinge (PM, Vortiger's Tower, 1–3)*

Time proximity is also indicated by the use of historic present tenses, which create an impression of immediacy when employed for a rapid succession or series of actions. This strategy is often used in narrative parts, but the category of deictic proximity is also relevant to the “bridging” between the world of the story and the context of narration. A relevant example of extra-diegetic time articulation is offered by Spearing (2005: 38-39) concerning the conclusion of *King Horn*:

- (14) *Nu ben hi bothe dede –
Christ to hevene hem lede!
Her endeth the tale of Horn (KH, 1525–7)*

Particularly interesting is the difference between *nu*, indicating the bridging between the time of the events narrated and *her*, which is completely meta-narrative.

3.3. *Timespans.*

A further relevant perspective on the action sequences narrated is the continuative and durative perspective, which indicates not punctual actions but timespans. This perspective is expressed through the use of markers such as *till*, which signals the endpoint of a timespan, and often the shift to a new location or action (15, 16). The actual duration of a situation or action is often marked by the noun phrases *a while* or *a (little)*

stunde (mostly in verse romances, 17-18).³ On the contrary, the beginning of an action or a sequence is often indicated by the verb *(bi)gan*, which can have an ingressive meaning but can also indicate gradualness (19) or even denote punctual actions (20, 21) in late Middle English texts, in accordance with findings mentioned by Brinton (1988: 120–57).

- (15) And helden ay the rith sti
Til he komen to Grimesby. (*HD*, 1202–3)
- (16) And the massagiers rode forth *till* thei come thourgh a town in whiche was a market. (*PM*, *Vortiger's Tower*, 99–100)
- (17) Nothings wiste Gamelyn of his brother gile;
Therefore he hym bygiled *in a litel while*. (*G*, 367–8)
- (18) Wilde beares he slew *that stonde*: A hardyer knight was never found. (*CC*, 45–6)
- (19) Tho *gan* the juge to be right wrath and seyde, “Yef thou canste do so, then haste reserwed thy moder fro brennyng, but wyt thou well...” (*PM*, *Birth of Merlin*, 362–3)
- (20) And sone to the kirke yede
Or he dide any other dede,
And bifer the Rode *bigan* falle, (*HD*, 1356–9)
- (21) Rymenhild up *gan* stonde
And tok him bi the honde (*KH*, 403–4)

Temporal anchoring, often quite precise when performed through referring to the time of day (22) or specifying the day of the week (23), can also be expressed in a wider sense, as when we find phrases such as *in May/in spring*. It is thus clear that time anchoring devices are sometimes quite specific, while in other cases the vaguer expressions point to a shift of the time reference to the background, and the need for higher specificity not felt so strongly. Of particular interest is the use of phrases referring to conventionally marked time units such as *at Pentecost*, which appeal to the common ground of the Catholic calendar, a convention that still applies in present-day English when we use phrases like *at Christmas/at Easter* to indicate specific days, but also occasionally the whole festive period.

- (22) *The day bigan to springe*;
Horn com bivore the kinge (*KH*, 499–500)
- (23) Tho *the sonday was y-come* and folk to the feste
Faire they were welcomed bothe lest and meste (*G*, 459–60)

³ This is often coupled with an indication of a shift in space or location, aided by the convenient rhyming of *while* and *mile*, as in “He had not ryden *but a whyle* / not the mounenance of a myle” (*SLD*, 399–400). This is the one case in which metrical needs (in this case rhyming couplets) could be hypothesised to have a direct influence on the time deictics chosen.

Interestingly, also this type of marking is more frequent in the verse romances analysed than in *PM*, possibly because the long prose romance has a relative unity in the events narrated, i.e. consists of a succession of episodes within the same story, while the sample in verse is made up of individual stories that cover rather large timespans.

The anchoring of the events narrated to a temporal scheme is of course also expressed through tense and other verb markers, which are the focus of the next section.

4. Tenses

When investigating *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Zimmermann (1973) identified the preterit as the most common tense in narrative parts, while present and perfect emerged more frequently in direct speech; among the exceptions, manipulations of the chronological sequence and meta-narrative interventions (repetitions, summaries, explanations) were identified as accounting for several uses of the perfect (Zimmermann 1973: 534). Conversely, the historic present was used mostly when focussing the narrative on a single character (id.: 537), or to highlight or foreground certain actions or events as compared to others (id.: 539). Similarly, Spearing (2001: 734) argued that perfect tenses interspersed among the preterits that dominate narratives “have a deictic effect, because they imply a [...] narratorial identification with an experiential centre which is that of the story, not of the storytelling”. Tense shifts should then represent changes in subjectivity, in narrator stance (Spearing 2005: 40-41). This is especially relevant since the English perfect tenses were on their way to becoming grammaticalised in Middle English, after first emerging in Old English. Their appearance with many different verbs, including verbs of feeling or perception, as well as other types of stative verbs, shows that the construction had different features from those it has now, and it is especially interesting to look for durative or other meanings in Middle English material (Carey 1994: 36-47).

Further details on specific tense uses are offered in the next sub-sections, starting with looking for confirmation of the abovementioned observations in our sample.

4.1. *Past, present, future.*

It is hardly surprising that most of the narration of romances should be in the preterit, while the portions in direct speech show an abundance of present tenses. It is noticeable, however, that the perfect tenses are very frequent in the sample. The latter tenses, as mentioned, were progressing towards full grammaticalisation to indicate anteriority or completion in Middle English, although we still find alternations between auxiliaries *be*

and *have*, as the extension of *have* to stative verbs and verbs of feeling is not complete yet (Carey 1994). Given the frequent recalling of previous actions, it is not surprising that there are markers of anteriority or action completion, performed through the use of the present perfect and of the pluperfect, which occur quite often both in poetry and in prose (24-28), although this tendency, too, is not completely consistent (29), and tends to increase over time: the earliest romances in the sample, such as *KH*, include very low numbers of instances of perfect tenses.

- (24) Whan he *havede don* that dede
Hwat the swike him *havede* he *yede* (*HD*, 551-2)
- (25) With Artoure there was a bachelere
And *haddey-be well many a yere* (*SL*, 25-6)
- (26) All that he *hadde before y-wonne*
Hit *malt* as snow agens the sunne (*SL*, 739-40)
- (27) And whan thei *hadde longe tyme fought* togeder, Merlin *rode...* (*PM*, *Arthur at Tamelide*, 201-2)
- (28) And the kynge, that *longe hadde desired* to speke with that lady, *arose* as soone as the queen *was gon*
(*PM*, *Arthur at Tamelide*, 333-5)
- (29) And it *was* the same swerde that he *toke* oute of the ston (*PM*, *The Baron's Revolt*, 133-4)

It must be noted that the tense-aspect system is supported by the modal system in triggering the inference-drawing process on the part of the reader/hearer, for instance subjunctives and conditionals, related to indirect speech and specifically to a reference to future in the past, especially in the reporting of directive and commissive speech acts.⁴ *Should* is used in several such ways (30, 31), with the deontic meaning coupled with the notion of future in indirect speech (32), while also present, but not very frequent, is the use of *would*, still in indirect speech to indicate future in the past (33) and/or volition modality, or to indicate repeated or habitual action (34). In all these cases, modalisation concurs to time deixis, by further specifying the past or habitual reference. Most of future tense cases, again in direct speech and in extra-diegetic portions, employ *shall*, and the tense-mood marking is particularly complex in all cases of “flash-forward” or “trailer” sequences (35-36), as will be further specified in the next sub-section.

- (30) He *saide* that he *sholde* hire yeve
The fayreste man that mihte live (*HD*, 1110-11)
- (31) And the clerkes charged the kynge that in no maner he *sholde* not se me alyve (*PM*, *Vortiger's*

⁴ The occasional uses of *should* related to politeness issues in direct speech, e.g. to increase indirectness of requests (Zimmermann 1973: 541-2), are not considered here.

Tower, 44–5)

- (32) ... and *seide* that oon *sholde* come which *sholde* delyuer hem out of tharldome and disese (*PM, The Birth of Merlin*, 14–15)
- (33) Than Gawain hym *blissed* for the merveile that he therof *hadde*, and *seide* that he *wolde* with hym *be aqueinteth* (*PM, Gawain's Rescue of his Mother*, 218–219)
- (34) And *evermore whan he was so*
Into his chamber *would* he go (*SLD*, 23–4)
- (35) So that Grimesbi it *calleth* alle
That thereoffe *speken* alle
And so *shulen* men callen it ay
Between this and domesday (*HD*, 745–8)
- (36) Whereof the tale *shall* declare you hereafter, and I *shall* tell yow how it fill (*PM, The Young Squires*, 236–7)

4.2. Consecutio temporum and the manipulation of sequences.

In this subsection we look at continuities and discontinuities in uses of tenses focussing on specific cases, i.e. when the chronological sequence is manipulated, an occurrence which, as mentioned above, is not rare in romances. As was seen with the indications of proximity and of timespans, the narrative can compress or expand time in many ways. While some action sequences are described in greater detail, in other cases the passing of time is indicated summarily (37–38).

- (37) And whan he com thider the cetizenis made of hym grete joye, for gretly thei were affraied of the Saisnes that *eche day rode and ronne* thourgh the contrey ... And whan the kyng was come thider, he sente and somowned all the peple that he myght, bothe fer and nygh, of sowdiers; and *withinne a monethe he hadde assembled* mo than eight thousand on horse and on fote (*PM, The Young Squires*, 70–6)
- (38) But *sone nam* until his lond
And *seysed* it al in his hond
And *livede* ther inne, he and his wif,
An *hundred winter* in god lif,
And *gaten* mani children samen
And *liveden* ay in blisse and gamen. (*HD*, 2930–5)

Occasionally, the narrative retraces its steps (39–40), and offers a “flash-back”; mostly, however, manipulations of the sequence, with the consequent shift in time perspective, concern the extra-diegetic portions, i.e. the “now” of story-telling, sometimes with anticipation of the future, both in terms of narrative progression (41) and in terms of “trailer” about events still to be narrated.

- (39) And so *peyned* thei that *were* with Kyng Arthur that they *have* hym *remounted* on his horse. But *first hadde* thei grete payne and traveile and grete losse, for the meene peple of the town *were come*

oute (PM, *The Baron's Revolt*, 169–171)

- (40) ne thei ne *ete* ne *dronke* of all that nyght, and no more ne *hadde* thei *don* of *all the day bifore*, for the bataile *hadde endured* all the day (PM, *The Young Squires*, 3–4)
- (41) ... to seche adventures in the reame of Logres; that *after endured* longe tyme, as this boke *shall rehearse hereafterwarde* (PM, *The Grand Tournament at Logres*, 90–92)

Although these uses appear to be quite established, they are not completely consistent. Before concluding our analysis we offer some final examples to illustrate specific cases related to the very frequent *when*-clauses and to shifts in tenses.

4.2.1. *When-clauses* + *tense shifts*.

Given the high level of parataxis in our sample, tense indicators and time expressions are crucial to the interpretation of the sequence, and it is thus important to investigate the ways in which these implicatures are created. It has been maintained that subordinate clauses that would seem to merely indicate a temporal relation, i.e. the *when*-clause type, contribute to create a figure-ground hierarchy (Keiser 1974: 131; Kissam 1977: 18–21). It is therefore relevant to investigate the use of this structure in greater detail, especially since it can occur with tense differences between subordinate and main clause.

When-clauses, often employed for topic/scene shifts to indicate a rapid succession of actions or a near-simultaneity, are characterized by two main tense choices: continuity with the previous sentence/clause or tense shift. The two options occur roughly with the same frequency in the sample, both in verse and in prose. The tendency seems to be in favour of tense continuity with verbs of perception, to signal the “instant” chaining of actions and reactions (42–43), while tense shift seems to be preferred when an action spanning over some time is completed before another one can start to be narrated (44–45), thus giving a greater time-depth to the sequence. This distinction is not consistently maintained, however, so there could be other factors contributing to determine the choice that could deserve further investigation. While the first two examples are consistently in the preterit, the latter two present a tense shift that includes a complete pluperfect, thus setting the action in the *when*-clause on a different temporal level from that of the rest of the narration, which then moves forward in the preterit. Conversely, when the end-point of an action acts as the “springboard” to continue the narrative, there is occasionally a switch to the present perfect (46):

- (42) And *whan these children approached* to this chyvachie, and *herde* the playntes and the cryes that the mene peple made for the Saisnes that hem so distroyed, that were well ten thousand of horsemen, ... *Whan the children saugh* this doloure and this sorowe, *thei asked* of hem... (PM, *The Deeds of the Young Squires*, 26–31)

- (43) *Hwan Havelok herde that she radde,
Sone it was day, sone he him cladde,
And sone to the kirke yede (HD, 1354–6)*
- (44) *Whan Gaheries hadde overtake Guynebans, he stroke hym so sore upon the helme that he kutte away
a quarter (PM, The Deeds of the Young Squires, 107–8)*
- (45) *Quanne he weren alle set,
And the king aveden igret,
He greten and gouleden and gouven hem ille, (HD, 162–4)*
- (46) *Now Florys hath undernome,
And to his fader he is coome.
In his fader halle he is lyght.
His fader he grette anoonryght, (FB, 219–222)*

Some remarks on the sporadic appearance of the past progressive to indicate near-simultaneity in *when*-clauses and similar contexts have been offered in 3.1. – this verb structure was, like the perfect, on its way to become grammaticalised in late Middle English, and therefore it is not surprising that it should still be relatively rare, as is also not unexpected that the periphrastic perfect tenses should be more frequent in the *PM* than in the verse sample.

Tense shifts outside *when*-clause contexts are also not rare, and have been often discussed in the literature, but without arriving at a comprehensive account. It is not surprising that shifts from a preterit to a present tense appear in direct speech in our sample as well (Davenport 2004: 22–3), as has been noted above in Section 4 concerning the alternation between preterit and perfect tenses (Zimmermann 1973). The hypothesis offered by Zimmermann and later taken up by Richardson (1991: 344), who also employed *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as evidence, is based on the assumption that tenses are used to foreground key scenes in narratives, as is the case of the use of the “historic present”. This focussing effect seems to be visible in examples like (47), which includes the opening portion of a passage of about thirty lines that concentrates on the contrast between the past and *now* (an intra-diegetic *now*, very different from the type exemplified in (14) above), highlighting the altered situation of a character through the contrast between pluperfect and present tense. Further examples show, respectively, a “close-up” of a messenger hurrying to his destination, which is again marked by a shift to the present tense (48), and a foregrounding within extra-diegetic address to the audience, possibly to stimulate the imagination further by making the scene more vivid (49), as in a “zooming” effect.

- (47) *Whan he that hadde been king with croun
Went so poverlich out of toun!
Thurth wode and over heth*

Into the wildernes he *geth*
 Nothing he *find* that him *is* ays
 Bot ever he *liveth* in gret malais (*SO*, 235–240)

- (48) *Now is* that traytour hom *iwent*
 A messenger *was* afftyr *sent*
 To speke with the kyng
 [...]

 The messenger *wolde nought lette*,
 The way he *rydes* full ryght
 The messenger, the noble man
Takes hys hors and forth he *wan*
 And *hyes* a full good spede
 The Erl in hys halle he *fande*
 He *took* hym the letter in his hande (*A*, 181-3, 197-203)
- (49) Ther *was* stronge stour and fell and dolerouse, for ther *sholde ye have sein* knyghtes and sergeauntes falle as thikke as it hadde be reyn. Ther *sholde ye se* stedes and horse renne maisterles, their reynes trailynge undir fote, wherof the sadeles were all bloody of knyghtes that therynne hadde be slayn. Ther *sholde ye have herde* soche bruyt and soche noyse and cry that it *was* merveile and grete doel to here. (*PM*, *Arthur at Tamelide*, 276-281)

5. Conclusion

The tentative conclusion that can be reached from this examination of a sample of Middle English romances is twofold: first, the cohesion of the genre stands confirmed, although the inventory of time deictics seems richer in verse – this might be an effect of the fact that the prose sample selected includes only one work, while the verse sample is more diversified. It can be observed however that there are very few time expressions that are not repeated over the whole sample, and hardly any that occur only in verse romances or only in the *PM*.

As concerns the second aim of the paper mentioned in the Introduction, the implicature generation seems to rely on established linguistic means. The expression of specific perspectives on action sequences is consistently entrusted to various devices that also include relatively new categories in the written language, such as tense, aspect and modal patterns that were still spreading at the time of composition. While there is ample reliance on the audience's knowledge of text-type patterns, as shown by the constant recurrence of certain expressions, there is also the exploitation of a connection with the common ground or background knowledge that text producers and text receivers shared within the community, as tends to be typical of “popular” literature.

Significantly, the catenation of different events is often entrusted to simple linkers such as *and*, and thus to general conversational implicatures of temporal sequences, both in verse and in prose. One main difference seems to be that early romances like *KH* tend to show more sequences of actions without linkers or other markers. This seems connected to their being closer to an oral form, and thus relying more on implicitness, rather than being due to the metre chosen (in the case of *KH*, a three-stress line, which is of course a quite compact format).

The inclusion of further romances (especially those in prose) in the sample and the extension of the systematic analysis to such texts may yield further interesting results about time deixis

under a pragmatic perspective.

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