

**Morphosyntactic Variation of Tenses in Students' Academic Texts: The Case of One
Target Higher-learning Institution in Lesotho**



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Certification

This is to certify that this dissertation has been read and approved as having met the requirements of the Department of English in the Faculty of Humanities at the National University of Lesotho for the award of the Master of Arts Degree in English Language and Linguistics.

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Declaration

I, 'Mamotena Ntlhaba, hereby declare that this thesis, submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in English and Linguistics at the National University of Lesotho (NUL), is my original work. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at this or any other institution of higher learning.

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Date

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Abstract

This study set out to explore the morphosyntactic variation of tenses in students' academic texts at the target higher-learning institution in Lesotho. Premised on the qualitative paradigm, the study used the sociolinguistic interviews and documentary sources as data collection methods in order to answer the research questions and achieve the research objectives. Drawing from the methodology, findings and evaluation sections datasets of the academic texts, the study revealed the systematic and salient use of the simple past tense over the simple present tense. Further, the study found the sporadic use of the present perfect tense. Based on the findings, the study concludes that while morphosyntactic variation particularly on tenses, has been noted across the texts, the phenomenon seems to pose some challenges on the clarity and objective of the texts thus necessitating measures such as a need for contextualised learning of tenses. Thus, this study could contribute towards the corpus of morphosyntactic studies.

Key terms: Morphosyntax, tense, variation, academic texts, variationist sociolinguistics, cognition, World Englishes

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List of Abbreviations

AAVE	-	African American Vernacular
APA	-	American Psychological Association
BSAE	-	Black South African English
CG	-	Cognitive Grammar
DCS	-	Diploma in Consumer Science
DIA	-	Diploma in Agriculture
ESL	-	English as Second Language
L1	-	First Language
L2	-	Second Language
LesE	-	Lesotho English
NNS	-	Non-native Speakers
NS	-	Native Speakers
NSR	-	Northern Subject Rule
NUL	-	National University of Lesotho
SABE	-	South African Black English
SEP	-	Student Enterprise College
TESL	-	Teaching English as a Second Language
VS	-	Variationist Sociolinguistics
ZimE	-	Zimbabwean English

CHAPTER ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.0 Introduction

This chapter provides the background, contextualising the study while drawing attention to morphosyntactic variation and tense. In addition, the chapter presents the statement of the problem and the aim, at the same time outlining the specific research questions and objectives of the study. The chapter further presents the significance of the study and briefly reviews the literature related to this study. Moreover, this chapter lays out the research design and methodology of the study, incorporating ethical considerations and data analysis applied. The structure of the paper concludes this chapter.

1.1 Background to the Study

Linguistic variation has been investigated from different perspectives and among others, from the variationist sociolinguistics and cognitive linguistics. Morphosyntactic variation, which deals with the processes involved in formation of words and structures of the sentence, is traditionally studied within variationist sociolinguistics (Davydova, 2014), the main theory for this study. As a sub-field within sociolinguistics, variationist sociolinguistics stresses the importance of social factors in understanding linguistic variation.

It is established that linguistic variation has long been studied, in different domains and Hoffman (2014) states that it has been noted and shown throughout history. However, linguistic variation became popular in the 1960s through the prominent and seminal studies (Labov, 1963; 1966). The pioneering studies mostly examined social variables influencing linguistic variation, in particular, phonological variation in urban areas. Variation continued to be observed in urban centres such as Norwich, Detroit and Belfast (Trudgill, 1974; Wolfram, 1969). Further research in linguistic variation was observed in social networks (Milroy, 1980; Milroy & Milroy, 1992). Morphosyntactic variation research also became one of the areas that attracted a lot of scholarship around the world, after phonological variation. This kind of variation was initially associated with different language systems in the inner circle countries. In relation to morphosyntactic variation, research can be traced as far back as initial studies in African American Vernacular English

(AAVE) Labov (1969; 1972). The scope of morphosyntactic variation extended to studies in varieties of English around the world. Studies in World Englishes also exhibited variation in tenses (Fasold, 1972; Kortmann & Szmrecsanyi, 2004; Marungudzi, 2016; Platt & Weber, 1980; Schmied, 1991, 2004; Schneider, Burridge, Kortmann, Mesthrie & Upton, 2004).

Elsewhere, scholars also studied World Englishes, including the English non-native contexts. Around the 1980s, the model of Three Concentric Circles was introduced and it provided insights into global use of English (Kachru, 1986). Researchers developed interest in comparing tense usage across world Englishes (Banjo, 1995; Davydova, 2011; de Klerk, 2006; Seoane, 2016a; Seoane & Suárez-Gómez, 2013; Werner & Fuchs, 2017). From the cognitive perspective, usage-based variation is also revealed as the result of morphosyntactic factors among others and can be traced back to the initial studies of Langacker (1987;1991). Emphasis is on variation that occurs from the expressions that emerge from the discourse through active negotiation by interlocutors (Geeraerts, 2010; Kristiansen & Dirven, 2008). Morphosyntactic variation in the use of tenses is seemingly a common phenomenon, even in academic contexts. Students, often struggle with applying tense rules accurately due to different factors. Although scholars have investigated morphosyntactic variation of tense, it seems that not much has been researched.

1.2 Statement of the problem

As a global language, English needs to be mastered when used because it is usually studied from the prescriptivist view. In Lesotho, English is not only the official language but also a second language. This implies that English is used in various official domains including education where it is only taught in schools as a subject until Grade Three and thereafter, it is also a medium of instruction (The Ministry of Education and Training, 2019). Teaching and learning of English language involves four basic skills but writing appears to be crucial. Ekajume-Illongo (2015) notes that the education system of Lesotho gives more credence to teaching of writing skills than others. In academic writing, the students' written texts are usually characterised by numerous and diverse grammatical errors. Chele (2015) found out that some of the errors include failure to inflect verbs in the present tense for third person singular nouns. Lebona (2019) observed improper tense shifts and wrong verbs inflections when form E students in selected schools in Maseru write their compositions while Ekanjume-Illongo and Morato-Maleke (2020) discovered that students at the National University of Lesotho (NUL) encounter problems such as improper tense when writing

academic texts in English as second language as a result, communication and comprehension are hindered.

Despite the importance of accurate tense, scanty attention has been directed towards morphosyntactic variation in the tenses used in academic writing. From the sociolinguistic perspective, sociolinguists such as Labov (1972) suggests that the errors or deviations can be investigated from the angle of variation, not as linguistic deficit. It is believed that strong emphasis or reliance on standard English stifles creativity in any natural language variant (Quirk, 1985). Kachru (1986) maintains that understanding the sociolinguistic features of English in its worldwide context remains a challenge as there is a conflict between perceived linguistic norms and real language behaviour. Research on Englishes in Africa has also found morphosyntactic variation in relation to tense-aspect. Thus, the studies have revealed, among others, levelling of the preterite and the perfect aspect as well as extension of the progressive to statives in English varieties (Buthelezi, 1995; de Klerk, 2006; Linnegar, 2013; Schmied, 1991; Van Rooy, 2006). In the context of Lesotho, Hala-hala (2021) found morphosyntactic features such as levelling of the preterite and the perfect aspect as well as extension of the progressive to statives in English varieties and extension of the progressive to some dynamic verbs in untoward contexts as well as to the statives. Based on the afore-mentioned studies, the focus was not on morphosyntactic variation of tense usage in students' academic texts. It is, therefore, necessary to explore tense use in academic texts from the variationist perspective.

1.3 Aim of the Study

This study set out to explore the morphosyntactic variation of tenses among learners at one target higher-learning institution in Lesotho.

1.3.1 Specific Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

- a) Is there any variation in the three tenses (simple past, simple present and present perfect) mainly used in academic writing by students at the target higher-learning institution in Lesotho?
- b) To what extent does this variation in three tenses exist?
- c) Why is there variation in the usage of these three tenses?

1.3.2 Specific Research Objectives

The study further set out to achieve the subsequent objectives:

- a) Establish whether there is variation in the use of the simple present, simple past and present perfect tenses in the samples of written academic texts of the students in different programmes at the target higher-learning institution.
- b) Explain the extent to which variation these three tenses exist;
- c) Account for any factors for such existing variation.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study can be realised at different levels including conceptual, theoretical and empirical. My interest in this subject has been significantly motivated by the researcher's practical experience serving as an instructor of the English language at the target higher-learning institution, where several problems were observed in teaching and learning of this language. This triggered and inspired me to gain more knowledge in order to find possible answers to this scenario. In this case, the primary beneficiary of this study will be the researcher as this study will increase an understanding and insight into the concept of morphosyntactic variation, in academic writing, focusing on three tenses (simple present, past and perfect tenses) as opposed to how they are conventionally used. If there is any variation from programme to programme, this study may inform the department offering the Communication Skills course to tailor the course content based on specific requirements of each programme. By analysing tense variation, the researcher may understand how students adapt tense forms and thus this study is likely to contribute towards linguistic theories: sociolinguistic and cognitive approach. Empirically, it is assumed that this study will be part of the research literature because future researchers will refer to it. Lastly, by sharing the findings, this study may probably inform the management of the college about the variation observed and may make recommendations, which may inform the development of tailored instructional strategies.

1.5 Literature Review

The review of related literature for this study is theoretically, methodologically and empirically grounded in Variationist Sociolinguistics and Cognitive Grammar. The focus of this study is more on tense which is fundamental in grammar. Logically, grammar is strategically studied within

morphosyntax. Morphosyntax is basically referred to as the study of the connections between morphological and syntactic elements in order to give meaning to language (Dobrovolsky, O'Grady & Katamba, 1996). Therefore, variation in morphosyntax is studied within the Variationist Sociolinguistics. Variationist Sociolinguistics is a theory that examines the correlation between variation in language and societal influences. It argues that the patterns of variation in language are not incidental or haphazard, but are ordered and shaped by elements of the society, including gender, social class, ethnicity and geographic region. As the main framework that underpins this study, its origin is traced back to the initial and influential studies of the prominent scholar in sociolinguistics (Labov, 1963, 1966). Studies indicate that tense was initially studied for variation particularly in AAVE where Labov (1969,1972) revealed the varied use of copula and negative concord.

Other scholars took off from him and of great significance include: the research in tense sequencing in World Englishes (De Klerk & Gough, 2002; Kortmann, 2010; Szmrecsanyi & Kortmann, 2009), zero marking for present tense (Kortmann & Szmrecsanyi, 2004, 2011); alternating simple present tense with progressive and extending progressive to statives (Schmied, 1991); zero past tense forms (Kortmann & Schröter, 2017) and the process of grammatical simplification and regularisation between the present perfect and simple past forms (Kortmann, 2006; Kortmann & Schröter, 2017). Other prominent scholars who have contributed significantly to the comprehensive research into variation in linguistic structures and usage within the context of South Africa include Lass (2002); Mesthrie (1992, 1995, 1997, 2002, 2004); Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008); Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert & Leap (2009).

Also, the initial works in cognitive grammar, Langacker (1987,1991), laid the groundwork and have been applied to study various grammatical phenomena. This theory emphasises the contribution of cognition and language use towards the development of structures and patterns. Some of the influential proponents of this theory include Talmy (1978) and Lakoff (1982). In language acquisition, the use of matrix verbs revealed gerunds acquiring verbal properties to show the present tense (Tomasello, 2009). Langacker (2008) brings forward the perfective and imperfective verbs. Langacker (2009) presents the rational description of tense. The latest scholarly works have further explored the use of Cognitive Grammar in educational settings,

especially in the teaching of tense (Bielak & Pawlak, 2013; Brisard, 2013; Kermer, 2016; Tanego, 2004). More details follow in Chapter Two.

1.6 Research Design and Methodology

For the study's research framework and methods, the researcher adopted the qualitative approach which involves human participants. This approach is informed by the principles of post-positivist paradigm. In this kind of approach, knowledge is multiple and dynamic. Creswell and Creswell (2018) mention that a correlation exists between the approach and the sampling, data collection and analysis techniques. Qualitative approach is associated with the qualitative methods of collecting and analysing data. Drawing on these, the study adopted convenience and judgmental sampling techniques and qualitative data collection methods in particular written documents and interviews. Triangulation of data sources was considered in order to obtain diversified data. The target higher-learning institution in Lesotho was used as the research site for the study where qualitative data were collected. The data collected were also analysed qualitatively with minor statistical descriptions, using thematic analysis. The study has drawn from the variationist sociolinguistics and cognitive grammar studies (Hala-hala, 2021; Langacker, 2009).

This study involved the human participants and documentary sources. On that account, the researcher adhered to the ethical research standards by firstly seeking permission from the university, through the supervisor. Then, the permission was sought and obtained from the management of the target higher-learning institution in Lesotho to conduct the study there. In addition, to avoid plagiarism which is a serious misconduct in academia particularly at the NUL, the study adhered to the Harvard style of referencing as prescribed by the Department of English, at the NUL, for both the in-text citations and the reference list. More details follow in Chapter Three.

1.7 The Structure of the Study

Chapter One has outlined a general overview of; laid out the phenomenon under investigation; provided the background to, significance of as well as the research design and methodology of the study. Chapter Two reviews the fundamental theoretical frameworks within the framework of variationist sociolinguistics and cognitive grammar. Chapter Three discusses the research design and methodology incorporating sampling, data collection and analysis as well as ethical considerations. Chapter Four sets forth the data presentation, analysis and interpretation or

discussion and Chapter Five is the last chapter and provides the summary of the main findings and conclusions of the study as well as the suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical frameworks and review of literature related to this study. The chapter is organised into three major sections. Section 2.1 examines the theories underpinning this study namely, cognitive grammar and variationist sociolinguistics respectively. Section 2.2 presents the tense system in English and 2.3 gives empirical studies on tenses in countries where English is used as first and second language. Section 2.4 concludes the chapter with the researcher pulling together the strings. The following sections provide the detailed information.

2.1 The Theoretical Frameworks of the Study

This study is grounded in two theories, cognitive grammar and variationist sociolinguistic theories. Both theories have morphosyntactic dimension and recognise that language should be understood as an ever-changing rather than a fixed system. While cognitive grammar sheds light on the cognitive processes that underpin language usage, it may not account for the social and contextual elements that influence linguistic variation. Variationist sociolinguistics explains how the students' social attributes contribute towards the use of tenses in academic writing, beyond cognitive reasons. Variationist sociolinguistics provides insights into variation influenced by social factors while cognitive grammar delves into the cognitive mechanisms underlying the choice of linguistic structures and their meanings. The sections presented hereafter embark on the discussion of the two theories in turn, beginning with the cognitive grammar theory and then the variationist sociolinguistics.

2.1.1 Cognitive Grammar

For this study, first reference is made to Cognitive Grammar theory. Because tense is the grammatical aspect, it is necessary to provide a brief description of the concept grammar, before delving into cognitive grammar. In linguistics, definition of grammar differs from author to author. In the scholarly spectrum, grammar is commonly referred to as the systematic framework of rules that regulate the structural organization of a natural language. It lays structural rules that govern the composition of sentences, phrases and words. Greenbaum and Nelson (2002) concur that grammar is a set of rules that permits the combination of words into larger units and further show

that it is a crucial component of language as it provides guidelines for correct word choices, verb tenses, subject verb agreement, punctuation and others. From this approach, these rules appear to be abstract. However, in linguistics, the study of language can be approached from different perspectives, either prescriptive or descriptive. Cognitive linguistics “which, in turn, belongs to the broad and diverse functionalist tradition” (Langacker, 2007: 422) explores language as a reflection of cognitive processes.

Cognitive Grammar is, therefore, situated within the broader framework of cognitive linguistics, functioning as a specific theoretical approach that emphasizes the interplay between language and cognitive processes. It is part of cognitive linguistics which views grammatical structures as derived from usage. As such, it is one of the usage-based models in linguistics that emerged in the late 1980s. It was coined and first used by Ronald Langacker (1987) during his investigation into cognitive grammar. Research leading to its formulation started in the 1970s with the intention of diluting the existing dispute of explaining linguistic patterns by consulting structural properties of a language. Cognitive grammar is an opposite of the predominant traditional generative grammar by Noam Chomsky of the late 1950s. It is a significant departure from traditional linguistic approaches. Unlike the traditional approaches which view grammar as just formal in nature, it emphasises the symbolic nature of grammar. It looks at the interconnectedness of language components and the role of cognitive processes in shaping linguistic structures. Cognitive linguistics “which, in turn, belongs to the broad and diverse functionalist tradition” (Langacker, 2007: 422) explores language as a reflection of cognitive processes. Like-minded linguists sought an option that would go beyond rule-based formal grammar. That is, language emerges from embodied cognition and is shaped by individual experiences. This model draws insights across different fields including psychology, linguistics, and cognitive science.

In Langacker’s (2008) view, knowledge of grammar reflects the cognitive processes and how time and events are conceptualised. The cognitive processes are the mental activities involved in gaining knowledge, understanding and interacting with the world of which some are conscious while others are not. They include thinking, knowing, remembering, categorisation, judging and problem solving. This cognitive theory views language as a crucial component of cognition and as a way to organise cognitive material (Crystal, 2008). Description of the different kinds of cognitive

processes that come together to form a particular mental experience should be targeted because conceptualisation is embedded in cognitive processing (Langacker, 2006).

In this theory, grammar is seen as “nongenerative and nonconstructive”, and symbolic (Langacker, 2006:44). That is, grammar of a language provides the speaker with a list of symbolic resources, including schematic templates that indicate known patterns in the creation of complex structures. Speakers use symbolic units to evaluate the conventionality of creative new expressions and usages, whether created by themselves or others. The new symbolic structures are not straightforward and cannot be explained or defined by autonomous grammar processes. Their creation is intended to solve the problem that the user of the language might have at the moment. The user not only applies the command of language conventions but also an understanding of the situation, the goals of communicating and any other information that may be useful. The symbolic structures generated tend to be more precise and detailed in their representation compared to linguistic units considered in isolation., and often contradict the conventions. If judged for conventionality, the symbolic units are classified and recognised as deviating from the norm. Therefore, “grammatical morphemes, categories, and constructions all take the form of symbolic units, and that nothing else is required for the description of grammatical structure,” (Langacker, 2006:45).

Cognitive grammar therefore views language as inherently symbolic and interlinked with perception and experience. The majority of lexical words have an array of linked senses that can be conveniently portrayed in the form of a network (Langacker, 2006). This means that language is a method of communication that relies on symbols (words, images, sounds). These symbols do not mean anything by themselves but people give them significance on the basis of usage, context and common knowledge. This is because language is based on associating phonetic form with a given meaning (Hijazo-Gascón & Llopis-García, 2019). This theory suggests that language usage is based on cognitive units which are mental representations of meaning linked to each other. It posits that language gradually develops a conventional collection of linguistic units over time that a person can refer to for communicating. The collection of linguistic elements is derived from the processes of listening to and using the language, as a result of this usage, it becomes deeply ingrained (Langacker, 1987). These units can be combined to create meaning and are likely to change as new experiences enter the person’s lexicon. Therefore, the structure of grammar within

any given language is a crucial element of cognitive processes in humans, interacting with perception, attention and memory. In this study, variation in tenses does not just reflect differences in grammar but also reflects different ways of symbolically representing time and events. For example, the simple past tense may be used to represent an event as a state or habit while the present progressive tense may be used to represent it as an on-going event.

Cognitive grammar holds that there is a continuum for grammar (morphology and syntax), semantics and lexicon. It proposes that these components are interrelated and do not exist as distinct processes (Langacker, 2007). It further suggests that syntax and morphology are two sides of a continuum that exist to shape the overall meaning expressed in a language. It asserts that grammar is meaningful, just like the lexicon. Therefore, it considers the interplay of meaning and structure because of the belief that each and every linguistic structure has meaning. It emphasises that linguistic elements (such as tenses) serve the function of expressing meaning and are inherently meaningful. In the view of Langacker (2006), meaning is associated with conceptualisation.

From the perspective of usage-oriented approaches to grammar, usage influences linguistic structure (Sinnemäki, 2014). As cognitive grammar is usage-based, it emphasises that grammar arises from actual language use. As mentioned by Bybee and Beckner (2010), this theory seeks evidence from usage to explain the structure of language. It suggests that the linguistic units and structure arise from particular defined instances of communication and aims to minimise reliance on inherent or inborn cognitive capacities. Tomasello (2000) notes that in Langacker 's (1987, 1988, 2001) usage-based model, the actual usage is of significance and not abstract rules. This means that language learning happens through frequent exposure (entrenchment).

In discourse, the linguistic structures are also dynamic and depend on the context of the interlocutors, thus acknowledgement of variation. “Cognitive Grammar maintains that an expression used with any frequency is generally polysemous, having a number of different but related senses” (Langacker, 2007:432). Thus, the grammar of language reflects as its users experience it. The patterns emerge from repeated instances of language use and the frequency of occurrence plays a significant role in shaping linguistic structure. The students’ actual instances and frequency of tense use may inform their knowledge about its structure. The frequent exposure to the linguistic element, in this case tense, also results in its development and entrenchment.

Language acquisition, learning and use rely on cognitive processes thus, exposure to input is essential. Based on Harmer (2004) the written language is purposefully learnt, unlike spoken one, therefore before writing, students are usually encouraged to think. In this study, the choice and understanding of tenses may be influenced by the cognitive processes. Also, the use of tenses may be based on categorisation, the way verb forms are mentally grouped into categories such as past, present and future. Cognitive grammar, thus, sheds light on how the cognitive processes shape language and does not recognise the lines between grammatical rules and lexical items.

It is, therefore, believed that cognitive grammar provides substantial evidence for variation and change (Geeraerts, Kristiansen & Peirsman, 2010). In the context of this study, cognitive grammar could suggest that the morphosyntactic variation of tenses in students' written texts reflects different mental representation of time which are shaped by the students' linguistic and cultural experiences. It can also help understand why certain linguistic variations occur by analysing the cognitive processes that underline them. For this study, the way students use language in their everyday interactions shapes their mental representation of tenses and their understanding of when and how to use them. The students' educational and cultural experiences also shape their mental representation of tenses, as they learn different rules and patterns for using them in different contexts.

Generally, cognitive grammar provides insights into how language structure emerges. As per this theory, cognitive processes, usage and experience play an important role in shaping language thus generating meaning. Langacker's seminal work (1987, 1991) became the cornerstone for this theory. Although it has proved to be useful, it has been criticised for being complex. In as much as it can account for variation, it may not adequately account for comprehensive set of relevant factors or variations in all the situations (Langacker, 2008). The following section focuses on the second theory that accounts for variation.

2.1.2 Variationist Sociolinguistics

Variationist Sociolinguistics, sometimes called Theory of Language Variation and Change (Tagliamonte, 2012), is a model in sociolinguistics developed and popularised in the 1960s through the seminal studies, particularly Labov (1963). However, he was not the first person to introduce the concept of variation but linguists have long had an interest in it (Wardhaugh, 2006). Britain

(1998) explains that sociolinguistic variation emerged partly following inadequate methods in dialectology and Chomsky's generative programme.

Variation, as an inherent property of language, is studied in sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics refers to the subfield within the field of linguistics dedicated to examining the social dimensions of language. As a field in linguistics, it is basically concerned with how language functions in a society and how it can be used to reveal the social identity of the person. Chambers (2002:3) defines sociolinguistics as "the study of uses of language" and for Coulmas (2003), language use in society is the empirical subject of sociolinguistics. Thus, Swann, Deumert, Lillis and Mesthrie (2004) describe language variation as an essential attribute of linguistic systems, most often referring to the use of varying forms from a single language across speakers, regions and contexts. It is present within each and across languages resulting in sociolinguistic and cross-linguistic variation. Besides happening at different linguistic structure levels, Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985) observe that the forms of variation noted across diverse Englishes are based mainly on region, social group, field of discourse, attitude and medium.

On this basis, the models like variationist sociolinguistics explain how varied the language is and has evolved over the past centuries. Labov (1963) drew upon earlier work in dialectology and anthropological linguistics. Variationist sociolinguistics investigates the relationship between linguistic variation and change, and the broader context in which language operates. For Anderson, Bjorkman, Denis, Doner. Grant, Sanders and Taniguchi (2022:605), "variationist sociolinguistics is a methodological and analytical approach to understanding the relationship between language and its context of use." This approach, associated with sociolinguistics, focuses on language as it is naturally used in everyday interactions, rather than adhering to an idealised notion of grammar (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog, 1968). This approach emphasises the importance of examining linguistic performance, which includes the variable nature of language in use.

Historically, language variation has been in existence since around the 600 BC. The ancient scholars, including Panini, the grammarian renowned for his contributions to Sanskrit, and Varro, a distinguished polymath in Roman scholarship, have been acknowledged for their observations regarding the systematic linguistic variation present in their contemporary speech communities (Mesthrie, 2009). The role of Wenker cannot be overlooked as he looked at variation in relation to geography. Gauchat's (1905) study is also regarded as crucial towards understanding language

use as it found variation between individuals, particularly men and women. However, Chambers (2002) highlighted that the impact of these early scholars was not widespread and had little impact. The idea behind was to demonstrate that language was not as homogeneous as the traditional linguistics of the time put it.

Later, during the twentieth century, the Bloomfieldian movement was instrumental in the development of modern linguistics, particularly in the areas of structuralism and descriptive linguistics (Mesthrie, 2011). The Bloomfieldian movement promoted a linguistic perspective that prioritises description of a language over prescription of rules. Even though Bloomfield may not have dealt directly with sociolinguistic variation, his contributions had a significant impact on the approaches sociolinguists would later use to investigate the complicated relationship that exists between linguistic expression and social contexts. The ideas developed by Bloomfield and his colleagues had an impact on variationist sociolinguistics and generative grammar, among other linguistic theories. Another prominent school of thought in linguistics was formed and became known as the Firthian movement, after British linguist John Firth. Firth focused on the functional aspects of language; namely how linguistic forms are utilised in context to express meaning. Firth opined that linguistic components can only be understood in light of the context in which they are used. Also, the contribution of Chomsky to variation cannot be underrated. Earlier, he maintained that the fundamental structure of all languages is the same since it is encoded into the human brain. However, later on, around the 1980s, he re-considered his thinking and acknowledged the significance of contextual factors in shaping language. Of great significance is the contribution of Sapir in sociolinguistics. Sapir highlighted the close connection between language and cultural contexts. In the 1950s to 1970s, language variation was popularised through the works of prominent scholars (Currie, 1952; Fisher, 1958; Hymes, 1964; Labov, 1963,1966,1972).

A fundamental aspect in sociolinguistics is the theory of linguistic variation that examines how and why language varies across different contexts, speakers, and social groups. This theory postulates that language is a variable system rather than a fixed one. The effective foundational work in variationist sociolinguistics proved wrong the point of deficit among language users. Labov (1963) viewed variation among the African American Vernacular English children as growth or creativity in language use not linguistic poverty. This variation can be seen in phonetic, lexical, morphological, and syntactic forms, (Schilling-Estes, 2006), depending on area,

socioeconomic class, age, gender, and situation. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, various researchers became interested in characterising language in relation to peoples' needs, experiences and interactions (Mesthrie, 2011).

The fundamental principle underlying variationist sociolinguistics suggests that language ought to be viewed as variable and ever-changing. Variationist sociolinguistics, therefore, emphasises the concept of linguistic variable. The term 'linguistic variable' denotes the existence of several expressions for the same notion. For Wardhaugh (2006:146) "A linguistic variable is a linguistic item which has identifiable variants." Variation surfaces when there are alternative ways to convey a specific linguistic feature. Variationist sociolinguistics stresses that language is not uniform; instead, it varies systematically across different social contexts, speakers, and situations. Understanding these variations involves examining the manner in which various elements, including age, gender, regional background, social and economic situation, affect language use. The linguistic variable is crucial in studying variation as it helps understand how individuals make choices in their everyday communication. Bayley (2013) puts forward that knowledge of both categorical and variable processes are crucial in understanding language use. While variation is focal, categorical processes referring to the rules and structures that govern language use are essential in helping establish the framework within which variation occurs. The categorical processes include grammatical rules, syntactic structures, and phonological patterns that are generally consistent across speakers of a language.

Since Labov (1963), much focus was on phonological variation. However, variation in morphosyntax evolved from Labov (1969, 1972) which demonstrated the significance of social factors in language use. Both studies proved that the non-standard dialects like African American Vernacular English had their systematic structures which were rule-governed. At the same time, he showed that failure to use standard language is not a deficiency but how non-standard varieties of English reflect their varied nature, in education and beyond. However, Tagliamonte (2006) holds that variables in grammar are less common compared to phonological ones.

This variationist sociolinguistic theory posits that linguistic variation is systematic, emphasising an idea of orderly heterogeneity. This means that variation is not random but orderly and heterogeneous and is observed at all linguistic levels (Weinreich *et al.*, 1968). It is believed that the variable structures can also be rule-governed as variation is consistently structured, as opposed

to being random. On this basis, the variationists believe that linguistic variables do not vary arbitrarily but systematically in any speech community. The linguistic variation is also 'heterogeneous' because multiple variants of a linguistic feature can co-exist within a speech community. The different forms of language that co-exist within a community are structured in a way as they follow predictable patterns (Bayley, 2013; Honeybone, 2011; Mesthrie *et al.*, 2009). This means that students' choices among tenses may be systematic. The variation observed in language use can be analysed and predicted based on recognisable social factors. In Hibiya's (2006) view, though Labov and his contemporaries introduced the concept of orderly heterogeneity, traditional linguists still regard variation as chaos.

Along with the variable, is the principle of accountability, fundamental in variationist sociolinguistics. The sociolinguists examine and account not only for the use of a certain linguistic variant, but also the areas where users could have utilised a variant but did not. The researcher should know the alternative forms even when there are no alternatives available (Tagliamonte, 2006). In this manner, every variant, whether realised or not, should be counted. As morphosyntactic variables behave in a manner that the alternate forms may involve varying inflectional forms, the researcher should account for every instance that occurred. In this study, the variants of simple present, simple past and present perfect tenses should be accounted.

The variable nature of English has been noted in pluricentric World Englishes models such as those proposed by Kachru (1982) and Platt, Webb and Ho (1984). The concept of the 'three circles' of English was introduced by Kachru (1985) and expanded in Kachru (1986), with the Inner Circle (native speakers' countries), the Outer Circle (English as a second language countries) and the Expanding Circle (English as a foreign language countries). This model illustrates the global spread of English and its adaptation in various cultural and linguistic contexts. It emphasises the social, cultural and surrounding factors that shape language variation. In the Outer Circle, English is often influenced by local languages, leading to variations in tense usage. For example, speakers may transfer tense structures from their native languages into their English writing, resulting in unique forms of expression.

Morphosyntactic variation, classically studied within variationist sociolinguistics, refers to the systematic differences in the way language(s) express grammatical features and structures, initially associated with different language systems. This type of variation is concerned with differences in

the structure and function of language at morphological and syntactic levels. For Schilling-Estes (2006) morphosyntactic variation denotes the differences in how words are combined into sentences in different dialects. Wolfram (2006) also notes that language structure varies with extrinsic characteristics including but not limited to gender, age, social standing, community ties, and national identity. Therefore, it is pertinent to consider the role of sociolinguistic competence in students' academic texts because students can adapt language based on social setting.

This theory has been criticised for concentrating on social variation, ignoring structural aspect of language and for its quantitative nature though rich data can also be collected qualitatively. As Labov (1963) is the foundational study in this approach to language, it influenced a lot of research to date. Some studies which exemplify variationist sociolinguistics include Labov (1966, 1969, 1972), Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1969), Trudgill (1974), Eckert (1989) to mention a few.

Both theories underpinning this study encompass the grammatical aspect (grammar and morphosyntax) within which the tense aspect is situated. It is therefore essential at this juncture to examine the tense system in English. On the basis of the preceding frameworks, the analysis of morphosyntactic variation in tenses within academic texts not only reveals how cognitive processes shape students' understanding and application of tense markers, as emphasised in cognitive grammar, but also illustrates how social factors such as academic discipline and peer influence contribute to variations in tense usage, aligning with the principles of variationist sociolinguistics. Therefore, the following section discusses the tense system in English.

2.2 The Tense System in English

As a central component in English grammar, tense is seen within a sentence thus, its relationship with morphosyntax. The tense is referred to as the grammatical aspect used to indicate the time of an action or event in a sentence. According to Bybee (1985), tense is a type of grammatical morpheme, or 'gram', that expresses temporal relations between events and reference points. It is also a general term that relates to a system in which a situation or part of it is described in words to locate it at a certain moment (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). In reiteration, tense refers to a category of verbs that conveys the temporal aspect of an event in relation to the time of speaking (Baskervill & Sewell, 2022; Crystal, 2008; Swann *et al.*, 2004). The study adopts Huddleston and Pullum's (2002) definition of tense.

When dealing with tense, the verbs are central. In English, the lexical verbs exist in five distinct forms namely, the bare form, the -s form, the past tense, the past participle and the present participle (Payne, 2011). The verbs are usually conjugated in order to indicate tense. Against this background, tense is of different types and the APA manual (2010) attest that English language has a total of twelve tenses. Some of these tenses include the simple present tense, simple past tense, present perfect tense, past perfect tense. However, for the scope of this study, focus is on the simple present tense, the simple past tense and the present perfect tenses. For George Mason University Writing Center (2017) these tenses have specific functions and serve distinct roles in different registers including the academic essays, reports, compositions, projects and beyond. The focal tenses are typical of academic writing and are explored in order in the subsequent sections.

2.2.1 The Simple Present Tense

The simple present tense is a grammatical tense in English that is used to describe actions, events, or states that are habitual, general truths, or occurring in the present moment. Herring (2006) indicates that the simple present tense, also known as the present simple tense, is the tense used for discussing habits, general facts and timetables and is referred to as simple because, in its most basic form, it just needs one word to convey meaning. It conveys a current state of affairs or action (Ngho, 1984). Further, Collins (2011) asserts that this tense serves to define things that occur frequently or that are generally true.

In English, the simple present tense is formed by the base form of the verb depending on the person. Pickett (1996) further clarifies that the simple present is constructed by using the present form of the verb. Most English verbs have two present tense forms, depending on the agreement with the subject. This means that, in the present tense, the verb can be used in its root form as free morpheme (unmarked) or an '-s' can be added to mark agreement. The root form of a verb is used for the first and second person in singular and plural and the third person plural. For the third person singular verb forms, the simple present tense is marked, where the suffix '-s' is added to the base form (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Quirk *et al.* (1985:97) outline the next examples to indicate the simple present tense in all persons and numbers:

- a) *I/you/we/they call regularly.*
- b) *He/She calls every day.*

In the examples above, a) shows the simple present tense in the base form occurring as a finite form while in b) the -s form is added to mark agreement with the third person singular subjects.

A number of authors concur on the uses of the simple present tense, particularly in academic writing. This tense is commonly used when stating facts as it is often used to describe general truths, express established knowledge, or discuss ongoing research. The Writing Center at UNC Chapel Hill notes that in scholarly work, the simple present tense serves the function of introducing a discussion, expressing current truths, conveying a sense of immediacy and relevance, making arguments more persuasive and engaging, presenting research findings, or discussing theoretical frameworks. In accordance with the George Mason University Writing Center (2017) some of the functions of present simple include modelling a paper, drawing broad generalisations, making inferences and for interpretations concerning current or earlier study findings and recounting the events, among many. On the same note the APA manual (2010:1) put forward the uses of the simple present tense as follows:

To express findings that continue to be true; to express truths or facts supported by research results that won't change; to refer to the article, thesis or dissertation itself and what it contains, shows, etc.; to discuss your findings and present your conclusions; to discuss your results and their implications.

Based on the number of the functions it performs, the present simple tense is generally considered default in academic writing. The following section discusses the semantics of the simple past tense, how it is formed and its uses in academic writing.

2.2.2 The Simple Past Tense

The past tense is another grammatical tense that serves to express the activities, events, or states that happened at a particular time in the past. It allows conveying information about what has already happened, indicating a completed action or a situation that was true at a previous time. The simple past tense, as indicated by Mavis (2011), describes events or conditions that occurred, existed, and were finished at a previous period. Ngoh (1980:135) clarifies, “the past tense refers to an action that took place in the past, at a definite time or during a specific period of time... for all persons.” Lastly, the past tense, in grammar, is a tense type that describes an action that took

place before the statement is made (Crystal, 2008). The following examples have been extracted from Ngoh (1980:132):

- a) I did.
- b) You did.
- c) We did.
- d) They did.
- e) He did.
- f) She did.
- g) It did.

For the above examples, all the persons, singular and plural, have been used with the same simple past tense form as noted with the lexical verbs.

As described by Pickett (1996) the specific verb form that indicates completed actions in the past is used. To form past tense, the suffix morphemes or the markers ‘-d’ and ‘-ed’ are added to the base or present form of regular verbs except for irregular verbs. Regular verbs are those that follow regular pattern when conjugated into different tenses. In instances where the present form of a regular verb ends with a letter other than an –e, a –d is added to form simple past tense. If the present form of a regular verb ends in a letter other than –e and -y, to form simple past, an –ed should be added. If a verb ends in -y preceded by consonant, the -y is changed to –i and –ed is then added to form simple past tense. For forming past tense of irregular verbs, such verbs totally change the form or remain the same. Irregular verbs refer to the verbs that do not follow the typical ‘-d’ and ‘-ed’ pattern but have unique forms which users are advised to study individually as there is no formula to their formulation. DeCapua (2017) points out that the typical irregular verbs in English include *went, had, ate, drank, wrote, drove, was* and *were*. These are called irregular because each patterns in its unique way. Alexander (1990:126) outlines the following as examples in the simple past tense:

- a) *I play -I played.*
- b) *I open -I opened.*
- c) *I arrive- I arrived.*

The above examples show some of the instances where the simple past tense of the regular verb has been used, though they indicate the use with the first person only. Yarber and Yarber (2010) further gives the following example: I/we/you/he/she/it/they studied. This instance exemplifies the use of the simple past tense with different persons, also using a different verb, *study*, for all the persons, with regular verbs. The following are other examples of the sentences in the past tense as extracted from Herring (2016:130):

- a) I went to the store.
- b) They flew to San Diego already.
- c) I read a very engaging book last week.

The above sentences exemplify the use of the different persons with the irregular verbs. In a) and b) the verbs have patterned uniquely to indicate the simple past tense. In c) the verb has not changed the form at all in the past.

In academic writing, the simple past tense is used to recount past events by reporting completed research, describing methodologies, or discussing previously conducted studies. Other functions of the simple past tense include reporting results from a prior study and describing the procedures or results of an experiment that has been conducted (The George Mason University Writing Center, 2017). When recounting experiments, researchers typically use the past tense to denote previous actions. The simple past tense helps readers understand the chronology of events and differentiate between what was done in the past and the current state of knowledge. In the following section, the semantics, formation and uses of the present perfect tenses in academic writing are discussed.

2.2.3 The Present Perfect Tense

In English, the present perfect is the grammatical tense used to describe past actions or events that have a connection to the present. Ngoh (1980) explains that present perfect tense refers to an action completed in the past with no specified time yet having an effect on the present and gives the following examples: Milly *has completed* her final examinations. and We *have argued* about this since eight o'clock. For him, they refer to actions that began in the past and still continue in the present. Yarber and Yarber (2010) are of the same view that the present perfect tense describes an action that started in the past and continues in the present. They continue to state that it is formed by using the auxiliary verb 'have' for all persons except for third-person singular subject which

uses 'has', followed by the past participle of the main verb. In the following examples, Yarber and Yarber (2010:289) illustrate:

- a) I/we/you/they have studied.
- b) He/she/it/ has studied.

The sentences above show how the present perfect is used with different persons to express an action that started in the past and continues in the present. In academic writing, the George Mason University Writing Center (2017) specify that the present perfect tense is frequently used to discuss earlier research results to suggest their relevance to the present. As stated in Lynch and Anderson (2013:52), "academic writers often choose the present perfect tense instead of the past when they are really interested in the present consequences of recent events." Therefore, the present perfect tense is used for describing a past situation in the area of inquiry, bridging previous related research to the current one.

When using tenses, the voice of a sentence is crucial and considered to show the relationship between the subject and verb in a sentence. As tense expresses the temporal information of the sentence through the verb which denotes action or state, Greenbaum and Nelson (2002) express that the voice denotes relationship between the subject and verb of the sentence, denoting the subject's role in the action. Herring (2016) establishes that there are two main voices, namely active and passive voice and the third, less common one called middle voice. In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action and the focus is on the subject and its action. The active voice creates a direct and confident tone. The passive voice is another kind of grammatical voice in which the verb acts upon the subject. In that event, the subject of a passive-voice statement is the one which receives the action. In this manner, the performer of the action can be de-emphasised or omitted completely. Passive voice is useful when emphasis is on the action rather than the subject and objectivity is the focus. The passive voice is more detached or indirect (Yarber & Yarber, 2010) and often found in scientific writing and formal contexts. As a result, passive voice is commonly used in academic writing to provide objective descriptions, reducing the writer's personal involvement (Lynch & Anderson, 2013). It is considered when discussing research findings and when the identity of the subject is less relevant.

As asserted by Payne (2011), the passive voice sentence construction is basically a subject followed by ‘to be’ verb and past participle form of the main verb. The primary ‘to be’ verbs are: is, am, are, were, be, being and been. When transforming a sentence from active to passive voice, it is crucial be consistent with the tense of a sentence. If a sentence is in simple present tense in active voice, when converting to passive voice, the simple present must be maintained and likewise with the rest of the tenses.

Tenses play a crucial role in academic writing and when using the different tenses, the learners are expected to apply them correctly in their writing but it becomes tricky for them. Understanding the structure and functions of these tenses enhance clarity and precision in scholarly communication. However, it is argued that the contexts and the speaker’s intent can influence the choice of tenses. Rickford (1986) argues that though language is usually studied as an autonomous system, sociolinguists believe that factors such as social class, ethnicity and social network play a vital role in linguistic variation. It is crucial, therefore, to explore tenses in academic written discourse from a morphosyntactic variation perspective, rather than analysing the errors. The following section discusses the empirical literature on specified tenses, some of which adopted the discussed theories.

2.3 Empirical Studies

This section reviews empirical literature on tenses (the simple present, the simple past and the present perfect), some of which have adopted cognitive grammar and variationist sociolinguistics. Some empirical investigations have revealed variation in tense usage across different contexts such as varieties of Englishes and others have highlighted the common challenges and patterns in academic context and disciplines. The research findings presented are drawn from the studies conducted in the Western, Asian and Sub-Saharan regions, with particular attention drawn to the English as second language countries, much as Lesotho, the country of the study is one of them. The studies are arranged geographically, starting with the Western, Asian and then Sub-Saharan regions. The following section presents the studies from different regions in turn.

2.3.1 The Western Region

In this section, the focus is on research from the Western region, comprising of countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia which involve native English speakers with deep understanding of the language.

Research into morphosyntactic variation was scanty until the early years of the second half of the twentieth century. This field was basically introduced in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a variant of English that does not conform to standard norms. Labov's (1969) study found that the use of the copula in AAVE was not random, but rather, influenced by a variety of social factors, such as age, gender and education. The researcher observed that copula is varied depending on the context and proved that the use of copula is driven by social forces. For example, speakers were most likely to use 'is' in formal contexts than in informal ones. This study is among Labov's works with considerable impact within the discipline of morphosyntactic variation as it has inspired subsequent research on language variation and change, and many studies that followed, drew on the principles of Labov (1969). Some of the earliest works inspired by Labov's (1969) study include Labov (1972a), (1972b), (1994), (2010), Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006).

The other study on negative concord, Labov (1972), still in AAVE, found that the use of double negatives in AAVE was not random, but rather, influenced by a variety of social factors, such as age, gender and education. The study also found that the use of double negatives in AAVE is not a sign of linguistic deficiency, but a feature of the language. In this sentence, '*I don't have any money.*', the negative particle 'don't' is attracted to the negative word 'any', resulting in a double negative while in the following example, '*I ain't never been drunk.*', there are two negative elements. In the preceding examples, the sentences are interpreted as being negated once as this is an invariant rule for all dialects of English, in America.

In Norwich, Trudgill (1974) found that the speakers exhibited the use of the non-standard forms related to gender and social class. Although tense variation was not one of the variables investigated, the study revealed subject-verb agreement, dealt with in the present tense as shown in the previous section. The study found that subject-verb agreement with third-person singular pronouns tended to be non-standard. The results showed that speakers from lower social classes tended to use more non-standard variants than speakers from higher social classes. Additionally, men across all social classes showed a tendency of using of higher number of forms that do not

conform to conventional norms. For example: speakers from lower social classes were more likely to say, ‘She say’ instead of ‘She says’.

A study by Kroch (1994) observed that syntactic changes in various European languages exhibited variation in grammatical areas in stable systems where options are forbidden. The English past tense (morphological) doublets were reported to be diachronically unstable, meaning that while they may persist for some time, they may not remain stable over long periods. This instability was described as arising from the competition between the different forms, which could lead to one variant becoming more dominant over time, while others may fade in usage. The examples of such usage include the following:

- a) “The tailor fitted the suit to my frame.”
- b) “When I was young, this suit fit me.”

These doublets were noted to compete with one another in usage.

Among other significant studies, Elsness (1997) revealed that there is a significant difference in the usage of the present perfect between British and American English, highlighting the historical and contextual factors that influence their usage. British speakers tend to use the present perfect more frequently than American English speakers, who often prefer the simple past tense in contexts where British speakers would typically use the present perfect. The research highlighted that certain adverbs, such as ‘just,’ ‘already,’ and ‘yet,’ are more commonly associated with the present perfect in British English. In contrast, American English speakers often opt for the simple past when these adverbs are used, which contributes to the overall preference for the simple past in American contexts. It was observed that the present perfect is more frequently used in formal contexts in British English, while American English speakers choose the simple past regardless of formality. Further, Elsness (1997) noted that the use of the present perfect in both varieties of English has evolved over time. The study indicated that while the present perfect was increasingly used in British English from the 18th century onwards, its usage began to decline in the latter half of the 20th century.

Building upon the findings of Elsness’s (1997) study, Hundt and Smith (2009) confirmed that the present perfect is used more frequently in British English compared to American English. In contrast, American English speakers tend to prefer the simple past tense in contexts where British

speakers would typically use the present perfect. The study focused on the present perfect in New Zealand, British, and American English and found that New Zealand English patterns more closely with British English in its higher frequency of the present perfect compared to American English. They further found that the present perfect is more common in conversational contexts in British English, particularly when discussing experiences or actions with relevance to the present. American English speakers, however, often opted for the simple past in similar contexts. The study provided the ongoing differences in tense usage between British and American English, highlighting the contextual factors and historical trends that shape these variations, too.

It is worth-noting that the earliest studies on morphosyntactic variation gave birth to varieties of English (World Englishes). World Englishes are all the local versions of standard English varieties spoken in the inner circle. With English becoming the global language, the number of varieties is constantly on the rise as research keeps discovering more of them, with their distinctive features. This also means that varieties of English have been studied in different parts of the world and at all linguistic levels. Szmrecsanyi and Kortmann (2009) examined 46 varieties of English worldwide, focusing on how the present perfect and simple past tenses are used differently across these dialects. The study identified specific morphosyntactic features characteristic of different English varieties, including the use of the present perfect. It categorised these features into L1 (native) and L2 (non-native), showing certain grammatical patterns prevalent in specific English-speaking communities. It highlighted significant variation in tense usage, with some varieties favouring the simple past in contexts where the present perfect would typically be used in standard English. One of the notable findings was the tendency for some non-native varieties of English to level the distinction between the present perfect and simple past. For example, constructions like ‘Were you ever in London?’ (using simple past) and ‘Some of us have been to New York years ago’ (using present perfect) were noted as examples where the traditional rules of tense usage are not strictly followed.

Schulz (2011) noted significant insights, particularly into how past habituality is expressed across different dialects of British English. The study identified a range of morphosyntactic markers used to express past habituality such as ‘used to’ while others might employ the simple past tense or alternative constructions such as ‘would’ to convey similar meanings in the Midlands and the Northern counties. For example:

- a) “One instance I was in there and ... there was a chap used to come in there, a painter.
(Midlands, Shrophshire)”
- b) “Of course you used to see all the old opera shows and opera singers, seen all the top class ones in their time, in the Opera House. (North, Yorkshire)”
- c) “Well you know they used, did you know there used to be a timber they used to make cog wheels of? (North, Westmoreland)”

The local linguistic norms from regional dialects have been indicated to shape the grammatical choices of speakers.

De Haas (2011) also revealed the complex morphosyntactic variation in Northern English in British Dialects. The study showed that the difference in verb endings associated with the Northern Subject Rule (NSR) reflects a distinction between agreement and non-agreement. The dialects with the NSR pattern have the two options for the present tense: the zero ending and verbal –s in relation to the position of the subject. The second person singular ‘thou’ and the third person singular consistently take the suffix -s, similar to the third person singular in Standard English. However, there is variation between the two endings in the first person singular and plural forms. In these instances, the zero ending, which is also seen in Standard English, appears only when the verb is directly next to a personal pronoun subject as in the following examples:

- a) “Birds sings.”
- b) “They sing and dances.”
- c) “They always sings.”

The patterns identified above is typical of the varieties of British English in the North. The study revealed the interaction between the historical, social and linguistic factors as responsible for shaping the grammaticality of the dialect.

In alignment with the findings of Szmrecsanyi and Kortmann (2009), Tagliamonte (2012) continued to examine the present perfect in various English dialects, particularly in New Englishes. The study found that in many New Englishes, the simple past tense is often used in contexts where the present perfect would typically be expected. Specifically, the simple past can convey present perfect meanings in about 59% of the varieties surveyed. This reflects a significant variation in tense usage compared to traditional English norms. The findings indicated that speakers in certain

regions (the Caribbean, African and Asian) opt for the simple past tense as opposed to the present perfect tense, suggesting that local linguistic practices influence tense selection. It specifically found that with Canadian English, the Canadians use the present perfect more often than Americans, but less frequently than Britons. The use of the present perfect in Canada is influenced by region, with Western Canada patterning more like the US. It was noted that speakers whose L1 does not have a corresponding form that aligns with the present perfect may be more inclined to use the simple past. However, the study indicated that the present perfect tense is undergoing changes in its function and frequency of use as these varieties evolve.

The present perfect in varieties of English has repeatedly been investigated across the world. According to Fuchs (2016), 20 different English dialects displayed different frequencies of the use of the present perfect tense. The study found that the frequency of the present perfect tense in varieties spoken in the same area tended to be the same and that in areas where English exists along with native languages, its users modified tense usage to match the grammatical structures of their native language. Also, the study revealed that the educated speakers were the ones who used the present perfect tense as opposed to the uneducated counterparts.

The studies have continually shown extensive research on tenses in different contexts including the academic one. From this perspective, many studies have investigated the simple present tense, probably because it is considered a default tense in academic writing. Around the turn of the century, Taylor (2001) found that the use of simple present dominated the Humanities corpus of research articles, followed by the simple past tense and the present perfect tense compared to other tenses. Within the Humanities, the study also found that, across the three disciplines namely, English, Philosophy and History, the occurrence of simple present tense was found to be highest in Philosophy at 76.7% followed by English at 72.9% and History at 8.9%. Among the individual texts across the three disciplines, generalisations could not be made as variation was observed as discipline-sensitive. Focusing on how various tenses serve distinct rhetorical functions within the sections, the study found that academic journals' Methods and Results sections typically employed the simple past tense, whereas the Introduction and Discussion parts used the present perfect tense. This is in line with the various communicative goals of these sections, where the present perfect shows continued relevance or findings while the past tense reveals finished acts. Some of the conclusions included that no discipline necessarily makes use of all twelve tenses; therefore, it is

important to understand how the time-related considerations and underlying meanings of tenses influence tense options in scholarly discourse; awareness of typical tense usage patterns and the varying significance of tenses across genres and disciplines enables teachers and textbook authors to prioritise.

Later on, Hinkel (2004) found that among the essays written by the Native Speakers (NS) and Non-Native Speakers of English (NNS), the use of past tense was highly frequent among NNS while the simple present tense was among the NS. The results showed that the type of written assignment had an impact on the tense selection, with past tense being more common in narrative situations and present tense being more common in formal academic prose. Therefore, the study concluded that L2 teaching of writing should address common usage of the simple present tense in specific discourse contexts. Both Taylor (2001) and Hinkel (2004) emphasise the importance of understanding tense usage in academic writing, stressing how it influences clarity and consistence of the texts. While Taylor stressed cross-disciplinary variation and the purposes of tense in academic texts, Hinkel concentrated on the distinctions between native and non-native speakers and advocated for focused grammar education.

Drawing on Hinkel (2004), Alzuhairy (2016) found that among the twelve tenses, simple present tense was frequently used, followed by the past simple, modals and present perfect in the research papers written by undergraduate English native speakers at the University of Florida. The study attributed this prevalence to the several uses of the simple present tense. The findings of this study led the researcher to conclude that this study could probably help the teachers, including ESL teachers, to approach the teaching of tenses differently and spend more time on the tenses that are important in academic written English. In comparison with Hinkel (2004), Alzuhairy (2016), highlighted the importance of tailored instruction. Although they differed in their approach, both studies contributed valuable perspectives on the role of tense in academic writing. This study was noted to be valuable to grammar textbooks' writers.

In the light of the above studies, Seoane's (2017) study revealed that the way language is used varies significantly depending on the social context and purpose of communication. The morphosyntactic features were found to differ across World Englishes, emphasising that the variation observed was not random but often correlated with specific registers, such as academic, informal, or spoken discourse. The study revealed that in spoken English, the adverbs just, (n)ever,

and yet are used to indicate perfect meaning and the present perfect periphrasis (have + past participle is not the only option to communicate perfect meaning in L1, L2, and ESD forms of English. However, this was found to weaken the semantics and reduce the use of the have + past participle periphrasis. For example: “You never <-_>You never</> seen this movie <-_>this movie</> called The Disclosure (ICE-EA conversation 1k).”

In reiteration, Widlitzki (2018) revealed how tense forms were used and how they changed over the Late Modern English period, emphasising the role of sociolinguistic factors such as social class, geographic location, and register in shaping tense variation. Examples include the differences between *I says* and *I said* as seen in narratives about historical events that fall under the larger category of historic present or simple past alternation. The study also highlighted that the use of ‘have’ is predominantly associated with perfect constructions that indicate completed actions or experiences, while ‘be’ is more commonly used in passive constructions and certain aspectual contexts. Furthermore, it noted that some dialects exhibit a preference for one auxiliary over the other in specific contexts. The study therefore established that a connection exists between grammar, context and sociolinguistic factors. In the following section, studies conducted in the Asian region are presented.

2.3.2 The Asian Region

This subsection explores the studies conducted in the Asian region, particularly in South and Southeast Asia. From the perspective of varieties of English, Seoane and Suárez-Gómez (2013) investigated the present perfect and found more than thirteen ways of expressing present perfect meaning in South and South-East Asian Englishes written texts, as opposed to the prescribed British English. As such, the study concluded that there is substantial difference in the expression of present perfect between these varieties of English.

Within the context of academic writing, research uncovered the challenges and patterns of tense usage among students at different levels of study. Abdullah’s (2013) research identified simple present and simple past tense errors made by the students as omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering, committed by Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) college students while writing essays. Omission errors involved students frequently omitting necessary elements in sentences, while addition errors occurred when students added unnecessary elements. Misinformation errors were characterised by the use of incorrect verb forms or structures, and

misordering errors involved the incorrect arrangement of words in sentences. The examples include the following:

- a) “We _ still alive”

In the above example, the auxiliary verb has been omitted. The following example demonstrates one of the errors in the simple past tense:

- b) “I _ not asked it from her.”

The example shows an instance where the student omitted the auxiliary verb ‘did’ and erroneously inflected the main verb. Several factors were found to contribute to these errors, including lack of command and competence regarding English grammatical structures, the contribution of the students' native language, adoption of foreign terms, and minimal exposure to the English language.

In the same manner, Shivani (2015) found that Punjabi speakers learning English made errors such as the incorrect use of the simple present and past tense, incorrect application of ‘-s’ inflection, omission of auxiliary verbs in perfect tenses and misuse of the simple past tense in contexts requiring the present perfect. The following sentences exemplify such errors:

- a) “She is teach me good lessons of life.” instead of “She teaches me good lessons of life.”
- b) “I was help her to locate the room.” instead of “I helped her to locate the room.”
- c) “We spends good time together.” instead of “We spend good time together.”

These errors were stated to be associated with L1 and confirm cross-linguistic influence.

Comparably, Muhsin (2016) revealed four main categories of errors committed by students in the eighth grade at a junior high school in Makassar, Indonesia. The most dominant error was missed formation, which accounted for 75.18% of the total errors. Examples of such errors include “He have belt.” This indicates that students frequently struggled to form the simple present tense correctly. Following this, omission errors constituted 16.79% of the total, where students omitted necessary grammatical elements as in this sentence ‘My school many class’. Furthermore, addition errors were noted at 5.11%, where students incorrectly added extra elements that were not required. For example: “I’m always smell fragrance.” Lastly, improper ordering accounted for 2.92% of the

errors, indicating issues with the sequence of words in their sentences as in the following example: “It time lunch, and I’m hungry” which should read “It is lunchtime, and I am hungry.” Muhsin suggested that the students should practise writing and try to use correct grammar.

Along the same line, Btoosh (2019) found that in academic writing such as the assignments and essays written by the learners in higher education, the tendency was to overuse the simple present and simple past tenses and underuse the present perfect tense, among the tenses and aspects studied. Also noted was that they used the simple present tense and present progressive interchangeably because they lacked the distinction between the two due to their L1. The study further revealed that the learners’ use of the preterit (simple past) was restricted by the grammar of their native language and their interpretation of verb meanings. The learners resorted to the simple past tense in contexts where the present perfect tense is typically appropriate as indicated in the following examples:

- a) “Last year, I wanted to meet somebody, but I do not (did not) know how to meet him.”
- b) “My friend encourage (encouraged) me to go and meet him in the park.”
- c) “It is (was) a great idea.”

The errors identified were structurally influenced by L1 where simple present tense is used in place of present progressive tense, as in the following examples:

- d) “The problem increased/has increased since 2000.”
- e) “She watched/has watched the same movie three times.”

Btoosh (2019) concluded that the results obtained from this research can have pedagogical implications for language instructors to expose learners to genuine L2 environments and curriculum and textbook developers for re-designing meaningful curriculum.

Following the pattern of Muhsin (2016), the findings of Indriani (2019) indicated that omission was the most common type of error, accounting for 61 instances, or 57% of the total errors identified. Misinformation was the second most prevalent error, with 29 occurrences, representing 27.1%. Addition errors were noted 12 times, making up 11.2% of the total, while misordering was the least common, with only five instances, or 4.7%. For omission errors examples include:

- a) “My mother work_ in the hospital.”

In the sentence above, the verbs inflection (marker -s/-es) has been omitted. Another example is

b) “She ____ not have a boyfriend.”

The preceding sentence is in negative form and the subject is the third person singular, therefore, the auxiliary verb ‘does’ should be inserted following the subject ‘she’ but it has been omitted. On the errors of addition, double marking was identified and the examples include:

c) “I’m always do the best for my family.”

This sentence has two verbs, ‘do’ as the main verb and the auxiliary verb ‘am’ which is redundant.

The study of Kareema and Fhirthous (2021) continued to examine the errors and found that ESL undergraduates regularly make errors in the use of the simple present, present continuous, and present perfect tenses. These errors were frequently caused by a misunderstanding of the principles controlling tense usage and the settings in which each tense is suitable as in the following example: “*I always gets up early in the morning.*” The morpheme 's' for was applied for all subjects, rather than just the third person singular. Others omitted the morpheme with the third-person singular as in this example: “*My friend go shopping.*” Others erroneously substituted simple present tense with simple past tense as in the following example: “*My brother and I left for school by 7 o’clock every morning.*” The students also erroneously used present continuous and simple past tenses for habitual actions like in the following examples: “*I always doing my prayers on time. I always did my prayers on time.*” These complications were mostly associated with L1 interference. Therefore, Kareema and Fhirthous drew the conclusion that majority of the students had problems in using different tenses in their writing.

The findings of Fadilah (2022) revealed the continued identical types of errors encountered by the students in their use of the simple present tense within descriptive writing. The errors identified were categorised and the first type was the error of omission, where students frequently left out necessary elements in their sentences, resulting in incomplete or unclear expressions like in the following example: “My mother tall and pretty.” The second type, identified as the error of selection, involved the incorrect choice of verb forms or structures. For instance, students wrote, ‘She like to cook my favorite food’ instead of the correct form, “She likes to cook my favorite food” indicating a misunderstanding of subject-verb agreement. The third type of error reported was the error of addition, where students added unnecessary elements to their sentences, distorting the intended meaning. An example of this error is the phrase, “My mother is always cooking every

day,” where the auxiliary verb ‘is’ is incorrectly included and ‘cook’ is erroneously inflected. Lastly, the study highlighted the error of ordering, with incorrect arrangement of words in sentences as in the following sentence: “My teacher math is like to teach us every day’ The correct sentence is ‘My math teacher likes to teach us every day.” This study has revealed a pattern of persistent errors among learners in this region. At this point, the section that follows presents the findings from the Sub-Saharan region.

2.3.3 The Sub-Saharan Region

This subsection delves into the studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a particular focus on East, West and Southern Africa, revealing unique features. Schmied (1991) stated that English used in Africa naturally deviates from the standard English to show its Africanness, much as it would in other non-standard varieties in the native countries. In relation to African varieties of English, building on Fuchs (2016), Werner and Fuchs (2017), found that the present perfect tense is used less frequently in Nigerian English compared to British English. This suggested that the use of the present perfect may be slowly fading or is simplified in Nigerian English. The reduced frequency and new functions of the present perfect in Nigerian English may be influenced by the speakers' first languages (L1) as they do not have a present perfect tense, leading to transfer into English.

Earlier on, in contrast, Buthelezi (1995) identified extension of progressive aspect as a distinctive feature in South African Black English (SABE), which he believed would be incorrect to associate with interlanguage errors. The study revealed that SABE preferred the progressive forms to express frequent or habitual actions as opposed to the standard English which uses simple present tense. For example: “*I brush my teeth every day.* vs *It [in the text] is including the reader as one of its listeners.*” The study further noted that though these could be regarded as ungrammatical, they are normal in Standard English. The study noted that this feature was variable and needed further investigation especially with regard to SABE structure, its status within the community and the role it may play.

Similar to Buthelezi’s (1995), De Klerk (2006) noted the extension of progressive aspect to non-stative verbs in the present tense in Xhosa English. The frequency of its occurrence confirmed its prevalence. For example: “*I am believing in them*” occurs more often than “*I believe in them*” in Xhosa English. This feature was noted as one of the salient features across many African English

varieties including BSAE, ZimE and LesE (Hala-hala, 2021; Marungudzi, 2016; Van Rooy, 2006). This is generally attributed to the diffusion of input language. In 2007, Makalela revealed that the Bantu logic plays an important role in shaping the BSAE. The study displayed that South African English speakers with a Bantu language background also extend the progressive aspect and do not mark agreement because in Bantu languages, agreement marking relies on the noun class prefix system. Examples of such usage include the following:

- a) “We *are belonging* to the new South Africa.”
- b) “The boy *want* to catch the frog.”

Therefore, Makalela (2007) concluded that Bantu logic plays an important role in Black South African English (BSAE) particularly in the use of the progressive aspect with stative verbs and non-marking of agreement.

With regard to scholarly writing, in one study, Saeed Abdul-Majeed (2016) identified the patterns in the usage of tense among the students of a different university in West Africa. The study revealed more frequent occurrence of the simple present tense in the results and discussion sections of the English theses than in Health Science theses. The occurrence of the simple past tense in the results and discussion sections was also higher in English theses than in Health Sciences. Therefore, the study concluded that the use of primary tenses (simple present and simple past) is critical in academic discourse and noted that the simple present tense was used to present factual information. Also, the research revealed that several factors that accounted for tense variation included the basic meaning and uses of tenses, authorial voice, disciplinary norms and purpose of writing. The researcher concluded that tense usage was socially constrained. Also, the study noted the present perfect tense as of secondary importance in academic discourse, after simple present and simple past (considered primary) tenses consecutively.

In relation to the tense errors, significant research has been done. Ngisah (2020) found the present tense and past tense errors among the Senior High Technical School learners. The present tense errors belonged to six subcategories namely, the present progressive (27.2 %) instead of simple present, simple past (44.4 %) instead of simple present, present perfect (8.0 %) instead of simple present, incorrect use of auxiliary verbs (9.3 %), overuse of verb (5 %), and omission of verb (6.1 %). Each of the following examples exemplifies some of the present tense errors as follows:

- a) “Some organisations are helping them but it isn’t easy because they” ... vs “Some organisations help them but it isn’t easy because they...”
- b) “I loved the people and the city very much and I hope...” vs “I love the people and the city very much and I hope...”
- c) “Many have got diseases like cholera and typhoid. vs “Many have diseases like cholera and typhoid.”
- d) “...may be they didn’t try to sleep because they are afraid to get ...” vs “May be they don’t try to sleep because they are afraid to get...”

The past tense errors were categorised as follows: simple present instead of simple past, present perfect instead of simple past, past perfect instead of simple past and the past passive instead of simple past. The following are the examples of such usages:

- e) “... and I was in school when the rain begin... (began)”
- f) “And when the student have finished their work..... (finished)”

The results showed that the students struggled more with the simple present tense than the simple past tense.

In a different context, Adaje (2019) exposed that even advanced ESL first-year students of University of Agriculture exhibited weaknesses in using the simple past tense correctly. Common issues included using present verb forms to describe past events and using incorrect inflections of irregular verbs in the past tense and to-infinitives. For example:

- a) “...to go to school to acquired knowledge ...” vs “... to go to school to acquire knowledge...”
- b) “I cutted the cake dedicating my life to God almighty.” vs “I cut the cake, dedicating my life to God Almighty. “
- c) “I didn’t expected what I saw.” vs “I didn’t expect what I saw.”

Due to an endless number of findings, the researcher concluded that some advanced ESL students were not able to use past tense.

Another study, Kangangi, Ndung’u, and Mwangi (2024) conducted among secondary school Learners uncovered the grammatical errors and among them were the incorrect verb tense and

form. Some students altered the auxiliary verb's and the main verb's tense in the past tense as in the following example: "I did not *went* to check the results immediately." instead of "I did not *go* to check the results immediately." Another observation was non-adherence to guidelines in English involving the tense with the first-person singular pronoun. The following is an example of such errors: "I *goes* to school early every morning." instead of "I *go* the school early every morning." The study found these errors as a natural way of learning a language and therefore concluded that corrective measures were needed and advised the students to continue to read and write in order to write effectively.

In Namibia, Krishnamurthy, Kangira, Tjiramanga and Beukes (2010) analysed the English errors made by Polytechnic of Namibia students, focusing on the types and causes of these errors. The study identified specific challenges faced by students, such as grammatical errors inclusive of tense errors. Among the tense errors were the present tense and past tense errors. With past tense, the students use the phrase *used to* to express complete actions however they misused it as in the following example:

- a) "They use to kill..."
- b) "I use to live ..."

With the present tense, some of the students tended to use the progressive tense with common verbs such as have and make as in the following examples:

- c) "I am having only ten dollars." vs "I have only ten dollars."
- d) "They are making a lot of noise." vs "They make a lot of noise (as a general statement)."

The study revealed that the root cause of these errors in the influence of the mother tongue and therefore recommended in-depth teaching and discussion of word classes, prioritising problem areas.

Recently, Haimbodi's (2022) research findings reiterated that ESL students committed inflectional errors in their written work. For example, the student wrote. "...*she want to recharge.*" vs. "...*she wants to recharge...*" This could be attributed to inadequate mastery of English as a Second Language rules as a consequence of the interference of the first language. Oshiwambo (the native language) does not have strict rules on first, second and third person inflectional morphemes. Therefore, the study concluded that the vast majority of Oshiwambo speaking students

continuously commit different errors including grammatical ones in the writing process due to mother tongue interference.

Makalela (2004) found that, among the differential errors observed, the third-person agreement inflections in the present tense and the use of past tense markers repeatedly, as some of the non-standard morphosyntactic errors, are overly generalised the first-year university learners in their written compositions. The difference in morphosyntactic forms may appear minimal but is shown to be significant. The following sentences are examples of the sentences bearing such errors:

- a) “The policeman were called to come and take the statement.”
- b) “Thami did not believed that.”

Makalela’s (2004) found that these errors were typical of spoken and written texts. In written texts, the register was used to account for the frequency of nonstandard forms because the type of writing was cognitively demanding.

In the context of Lesotho, Hala-hala (2021) also explored the preterite and the perfect aspect from the sociolinguistic angle. He observed levelling of the two in the emerging LesE as in the following examples:

- a) “The doctors had travelled to CT in February, and returned to Johannesburg a week Ago. [PCfm]”
- b) “We already have regulations which have gone through APC in May 2020. [NUL Senate]”

The stated examples highlight instances of levelling the past with perfect aspect, typical of a Sotho way of forming the two, which is also opposed to formation in British English. The study therefore concluded that the levelling process was one of the morphosyntactic variants in the emerging LesE.

From the academic viewpoint, Chele’s (2015) study found that among the third-year university students, the present tense is used to report current events in ‘Environment and Conservation in Africa’ course as opposed to other Historical courses in the same department. The study also revealed inappropriate omission and addition of the third person in the present tense as some of the simple errors found in students’ writing. The researcher attributed this problem to the confusion that arises when the verb is separated from the subject that agrees it agrees with as in the following

instance: “*An example of living things are mountains.*” The researcher concluded that linguistic environments contributed to performance and competence errors.

Elsewhere, Lebona (2019) found that the teachers of the selected schools in Maseru expect the learners to maintain and master the simple present tense for descriptive, argumentative and informative compositions. However, from the essay writing task by students, the findings revealed that the students did not stick to the use of simple present tense but shifted among tenses unswervingly, leading to errors found and categorised by the researcher. The excerpt that follows illustrates the errors identified by Lebona (2019), resulting from inappropriate shifting.

old people fall in love with small children with the hope that this child will gave her money. It happened that one of my friend fall in love with the old man. This man was a rich and have a gigantic house. When my friend need to go anywhere she like, this man will take her with his cars. The man even buy my friend a laptop. Later on my friend told him she don't love him anymore. The man was angry and insult my friend.

The foregoing excerpt shows one of the instances where students have frequently altered tenses within sentences, causing confusion and a lack of clarity in their writing. The students have demonstrated ability to use simple present tense though they were not able to apply simple present tense verb rules such as addition of ‘s’ to agree with the subject in third person. One of the conclusions was that the learners need proper tense management skills and language competence development through practice.

In 2022 Chobokoane, also revealed that the high-school students in Thaba-Tseka schools mixed the simple present and past tense without valid reasons in one sentence as in the following example: “... *it is a not good idea for high school learners to use contraceptives because it had some negative consequences.*” This example shows that learners struggle with maintaining the right tense in a sentence. This usage could not strictly be associated with Facebook as Chobokoane indicated that it had both negative and positive impact on students’ learning.

On the contrary, Lekena (2023) continued to reveal that the learners enrolled in their third year of study at the National University of Lesotho struggled with maintaining agreement in the present

tense. The students had difficulty in recognising the differences between the formal and informal contexts, therefore this affected their grammatical competence in essay writing. For example:

- a) “The pandemic made people dies like flies.”
- b) “My mom suffer loss of memory even now.”

The identified grammatical errors were linked to the informal usage on the social platform and the study concluded that the social media weakens the skills that the students need in formal contexts. Thus, the recommendation that followed was that the students should maintain the use of correct grammatical features on social media so that they can develop the habit of writing correctly.

Vast literature reveals that many studies have investigated tense from different perspectives. While the existing literature provides valuable insights into the use of simple present, simple past, and present perfect tenses across various regions, including the Western, Asian, and Sub-Saharan contexts, there is still lack of comprehensive studies that specifically address the morphosyntactic variations in academic writing among students. Studies conducted seem to have mostly focused on error analysis and the challenges students face in mastering tense usage; there is an information gap left which requires further research to delve into the underlying factors that contribute to these errors. This study, therefore, seeks to close this gap by offering an in-depth examination of the morphosyntactic variation of tense in students' academic texts. As the study's research context is in an institution of higher learning in Lesotho, offering diverse programmes in the area of agricultural sciences, research conducted is usually along the perspective of the agricultural sciences. Hence, there is paucity on linguistic research at the target institution. In Lesotho, although Hala-hala (2021) investigated the sociolinguistics of Lesotho, the study appears to have not explored the tenses in academic texts, particularly in this target higher-learning institution. Therefore, this study sought to fill such information gap by exploring tense usages in students' academic texts from the morphosyntactic perspective.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the theoretical (conceptual) frameworks by highlighting the theories that underpin this study: the variationist sociolinguistics and cognitive grammar and theorising the key concepts in this study. It has also reviewed empirical literature related to tense and studies have proved that there is a lot of literature on tenses. The studies have reflected that there are

identifiable morphosyntactic features in different varieties of English which reveal variation in tense. With the aim of exploring morphosyntactic variation of tenses in students' academic texts, the next chapter outlines the research design and techniques used to collect data for this study.

CHAPTER THREE

THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the research design and methodology of this study. The chapter unfolds in seven main sections. Section 3.1 provides the research context highlighting the geopolitical situation of Lesotho as well as the education system and language situation of Lesotho. Section 3.2 discusses the qualitative research design upon which the study is based. Section 3.3 presents the study's sampling techniques incorporating sampling in variationist sociolinguistics along with the research site and sample. Section 3.4 further presents data collection instruments such as sociolinguistic interviews and documentary sources. Section 3.5 explains the ethical considerations for the study. Section 3.6 presents data analysis techniques and methods and the final section 3.7 concludes the chapter by pulling together the main points.

3.1 Research Context

This study was conducted within the broad domain of education in Lesotho and the research site is one higher-learning institution in Lesotho. The following sections present the geopolitical situation of Lesotho, the education system of Lesotho and the general background of the target higher-learning institution.

3.1.1 Geopolitical Situation of Lesotho

Lesotho is a Southern African country which has only one neighbouring country, the Republic of South Africa (RSA). As documented by the Lesotho Bureau of Statistics Census report (2018), the overall population size of the country is about 2 million people. The report continues to show that as an enclave, the country relates directly with the RSA geographically, politically, and socioeconomically, to mention a few. The Kingdom in the Sky is further divided into the four primary regions namely, the Senqu Valley, the Highlands, the Foothills, and the Lowlands. Maseru is the capital city found in the central part of the country (Lesotho National Development Corporation, 2023).

As an ex-colony, part of the legacy that Lesotho has inherited from Britain include the English language and the education system. English serves as an official language within the country,

alongside Sesotho. In its linguistic policy, the Ministry of Education and Training (2019) stipulates that the majority of Basotho use Sesotho on a daily basis for various communication purposes while the small percentage of Basotho use the minority languages. On this ground, Lesotho may be classified as a multilingual nation because of existence of minority languages along Sesotho and English. Beside Sesotho and English, the Ministry of Education and Training (2019) continues to indicate that there are also minority languages spoken primarily in the rural parts of Lesotho.

3.1.2 Education System and Language Situation of Lesotho

In Lesotho, the education system is structured into formal and informal education. The formal system comprises pre-primary education, primary education consisting of seven years culminating in Primary School Leaving certificate, secondary and tertiary education. Pre-primary education is optional, but primary education is free and compulsory in government schools for all the children between the ages of six and thirteen. Other than government schools, there are also privately-owned, community and church schools. As outlined by the Constitution of Lesotho (2009), English and Sesotho are official languages and both languages are used in schools. Sesotho is a medium of instruction for the first three years of primary and is taught as a subject at both primary and post-primary levels (The Ministry of Education and Training, 2023). From Grade Four, the medium of instruction changes to English and English is also taught as a subject.

With the current education system, the Ministry of Education and Training (2008) asserts that the post-primary or secondary education builds on basic education, covered during the initial ten years of education, in preparation for the tertiary education. The Ministry of Education and Training is the overseer of the primary and secondary schools regardless of their status. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) oversees the tertiary education provided by a number of institutions of higher learning that cater for different academic and vocational needs and is responsible for their language needs (the Ministry of Education and Training, 2019). The institutions of higher learning include universities and colleges such as National University of Lesotho (NUL), Lesotho College of Education (LCE), Lerotholi Polytechnic (LP), Lesotho Opportunities Industrialisation Centre (LOIC), Roma College of Nursing, to mention a few. As the research site is one of these institutions of higher learning in Lesotho, it is overseen by CHE, which assures the quality standards in the country. More details about the research site will follow in the next sections. It is important, while at this point, to mention that the next section delves into the research design and methodology.

3.2 Research Design and Methodology

The design and methodology of the study are grounded in the principles of the qualitative approach to research. Creswell and Creswell (2018:335) define research designs as the “types of inquiry within qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches, that provide specific direction for procedures in a research study.” The qualitative research design adopted is one of the three common designs. To differentiate among the three, the authors continue to clarify that quantitative research deals with statistics and numbers. It is further used to test theories and assumptions while qualitative research deals with words and aims at exploring and understanding the meanings created by individuals.

Based on these approaches to research, Creswell (2012) opines that they should align with the philosophical assumptions even though they (philosophical assumptions) are not usually explicit in research. The epistemological underpinnings include the subjective nature of knowledge which also depends on the context. As noted by Maxwell (2011:10), “There is a pervasive assumption among qualitative researchers that qualitative research is grounded in a constructivist and subjectivist epistemology.” Since qualitative design involves the human subjects, qualitative researchers believe in understanding the experience of the participants. In other words, the words and behaviours of the participants are analysed and interpreted to gain deeper insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The ultimate goal is to know how others view the world. As such qualitative design relies on empirical data. Apart from that, context also plays a critical role in understanding the phenomenon. Understanding the participants’ historical and cultural backgrounds requires the scholars should take into account specific contexts in which the participants live (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In early social sciences research, studies were however, basically based on quantitative design. This could be explained by the notion that for the longest time, the dominant approach to research was quantitative and aligned with positivist paradigm. The researchers were basically interested in frequency counts. When the qualitative approach emerged in the late half of the 20th century, there was a paradigm shift. The researchers began to try to understand phenomena through various lenses, that is, subjectively (Creswell, 2012). The qualitative research design aligns with interpretivist philosophical worldview. Basic considerations of the interpretivist worldview,

sometimes called social constructivism, include striving to understand the world by being subjective. Creswell and Creswell (2018:46) acknowledge, “Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences- meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple...” The nature of truth in this worldview is multiple truth or realities. The main goal is to use as much information from the participants as possible. In this perspective, reality can be constructed and the use of open-ended questions is preferred. Creswell and Creswell (2018) contend that the meaning is usually social.

Besides the interpretivist philosophical beliefs, the study also adopted the cross-sectional case study approach for an in-depth understanding of the social phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). The whole idea behind case studies is to investigate a real-life phenomenon focusing on small samples, (Taherdoost, 2016) while unearthing complex issues. The researcher does not necessarily have to immerse themselves in the culture as it is the case in ethnographic studies. The whole idea is to understand the complexity of a single case, at the same time getting comprehensive information. The following section discusses sampling and the sampling techniques for the study.

3.3 Sampling

The term sampling refers to “the process of selecting just a small group of cases from a large group” (Walliman, 2018:124). Otherwise it can be defined in terms of dividing a population into subsets that can be used to infer or generalise findings depending on the approach and sampling technique chosen. The term population may be defined in relation to the total number of the inhabitants of a country (Taherdoost, 2016). However, in research, population denotes the entire set of cases from which the researcher draws a sample, using different techniques. For Walliman (2018), population in research refers to the overall number of things or situations being studied, rather than a specific number of individuals. Thus, population can include specific things, organisations, people, or events. The author further states that to give a thorough picture of any study, every person relevant to research would be considered for data collection but in real life, it is impossible, ridiculous and unnecessary to contact everyone. For that reason, a sample should be obtained to accurately represent the population being studied through sampling.

In research, there are different ways of sampling which are generally random or probability and non-random or non-probability (Taherdoost, 2016; Walliman, 2018). Probability methods strive for representativeness while non-probability techniques do not (Buchstaller & Khattab, 2013). For

this study, non-probability methods of qualitative research, were adopted. These methods align with qualitative research in that Creswell and Creswell (2018) highlight that qualitative research does not necessarily imply that sampling be done randomly but the underlying notion is to deliberately choose participants and research sites (or written or visual materials) that would most effectively help the researcher better understand the problem and the research questions. In this way they allow the researcher to focus on participants who can provide rich data about the phenomenon under study. The following sections elaborate on the chosen techniques, convenience and judgmental sampling, which are also used within the variationist sociolinguistics.

3.3.1 Convenience Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling, also known as opportunity sampling, is one of the non-probabilistic sampling methods through which the selection procedure is based on easy access (Dawson, 2002; Lewin, 2005; Taherdoost, 2016). In qualitative research, the aim is to collect easily accessible data from available participants. The choice of this sampling technique enabled the researcher to economise on time and expenses yet having access to rich data. Lewin (2005) suggests that a local school or hospital can serve as an example of an institution where a researcher can conduct a study with convenience targeting the participants with the preferred qualities. It was worth employing this technique because of the ease of access to the research site and to the documentary data sources as well as willingness of the participants to engage in the study.

Gathering data with this type of sampling could be cost-effective but its samples can be subjected to the risk of selection bias. For Buchstaller and Khattab (2013), there is high possibility of skewed results and the generalisability of results is challenged. Hala-hala (2021) adopted the same technique and it generated the anticipated results. In order to overcome the selection bias, the researcher also adopted the purposive sampling technique. The following section discusses purposive sampling technique.

3.3.2 Purposive Sampling Technique

This sampling strategy is sometimes called stratified random or judgemental sampling (Buchstaller & Khattab, 2013; Tagliamonte, 2006). It is suitable for qualitative research and is also common in sociolinguistic research because of its methodological and pragmatic reasons (Hoffman, 2014). It involves the deliberate inclusion in the sample of participants who can provide information that

cannot be gained elsewhere because of the belief that there are no other alternatives. Taherdoost (2016) points out that the researchers sample in this manner because they believe that such participants are relevant and valuable in addressing the research questions and objectives.

This second method, judgmental sampling, was chosen in order to find the right participants for the study. After choosing the participants purposefully, I then ensured that all target students have an equal chance of being selected. This method has been chosen because of its cost efficacy, time efficiency and the depth of insight into particular cases or groups. This study has adopted this technique in concordance with other studies such as Lebona (2019) and variationist sociolinguistic studies including Hala-hala (2021). This technique helped in the in-depth understanding of variation in tense usage at the target higher-learning institution. In this context, I also used stratified purposive sampling to enable collection of written data from the students and spoken data from the teachers, to obtain diversified data. The next section presents the research site and the sample.

3.3.3 The Research Site and Sample

As already stated, the research site for this study is an institution of higher learning established around the early 1950s. It operates two campuses, one in Maseru, the capital city of Lesotho and the other in Hlotse, in the northern district of Leribe. As the institution of higher learning, English is used officially and the expectation is to use Standard English. Its major focus is on agricultural education and its objective is to train young, Basotho individuals on and equip them with the necessary skills in various fields of agriculture. It offers the following diploma programmes: Diploma in Agriculture, Diploma in Forestry and Resource Management, Diploma in Consumer Science, Diploma in Consumer Science Education and Diploma in Agricultural Engineering, Land and Water Management.

As specified in its established minimum entry requirements (Admission Policy, 2020) in order to be considered for provisional admission in any of the five Diploma programmes, a grade not exceeding seven (7/D) in English Language is a pre-requisite, among others, regardless of the declaration by the language policy (2019, 2023) that English shall cease to be an impediment to further learning and success. To support students' language learning, the target institution offers English language courses to enhance students' proficiency through the pre-entry programme and Communication and Study Skills (SQSD 1401) course to students across all the programmes. Thus, English is essential for students' academic success as in other institutions of higher learning.

While it would be helpful to consider all the population at the target institution for the study, it is impractical to do so. While the sampled students may not necessarily represent all the students at the college, it is crucial to obtain the justifiable size of the sample that is easy to work with, at the same time providing rich data. The principle is that the sample represents the population because of the shared characteristics as a sample is a subset or a proportion of a representative of the population under investigation, drawn in order to simplify the research task. Bijeikienė and Tamošiūnaitė (2013:45) put it in simpler terms, “a sample represents the population.” If the data collected from the sample by the researchers is the same as what they would acquire from the others, the researchers can make inferences from those answers which relate them to the rest (Walliman, 2018).

In qualitative research, the size of the sample is not an issue of concern, as long as the study can generate data that are manageable. Tagliamonte (2006) emphasise that the size of the sample must be balanced with the available time and resources for data handling. The sample size, based on Tagliamonte (2006) should not be too large or small but the one that works. For Gordon (2003), large sample sizes are not necessary but smaller sizes are preferable. Thus, it is essential to select the size of the sample depending on the type and purpose of the research.

The sample for this study was composed of human and non-human participants. The data were drawn from the written works produced by learners who have completed their first year of study at the college, having been taught Communication Skills and those who have completed the SEP in their respective programmes, in this case DIA and DCS as well as the teachers. Oral and written data were gathered using the interviews with the teachers and the existing report documents written by students in the academic year 2022/23 at the selected higher-learning institution. The teachers represented the two campuses of the college and provided oral data to support the findings from the written texts. As part of the ethical considerations, their names and campuses have been withheld and pseudonyms have been used for confidentiality and anonymity reasons. They were identified as teacher X and teacher Y from campus A and campus B. The written texts (the past examination papers and students’ assessment reports) constituted the documentary sources. The total of human participants was two teachers while that of non-human participants was 96, derived by taking 30% of the overall population from each stratum: the first-year students were 127 while

the second-year students were 194. Therefore, the following section, discusses the data collection methods for this study.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Grounding the methods of this study are the tenets of qualitative design. Common qualitative research methods include one-to-one interviews, focus groups, text analyses and case studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Taherdoost, 2022). To provide rich data, these methods can be used together. Therefore, data were gathered from spoken and written texts at the target institution. Although some earlier studies in language variation and change were quantitative in nature, there have been some developments and evolution. Research in language variation and change is characterised by corpora, whether spoken or written, with the former comprising conversations with the real people in the real world while the latter comprises of historic works. As a result, language variation and change methods differ from those employed in linguistics because they explore socially embedded phenomenon (Tagliamonte, 2012). In qualitative research, scholars collect a range of data types and devote a significant amount of time to gathering information in natural contexts.

As this study adopted case study strategy, which usually uses multiple sources of data, this study aligned itself with the fundamentals of qualitative studies. To collect data, both students and teachers were considered and a combination of data collection techniques was employed in an effort to answer the study's research question. Kabir (2016) emphasises, “qualitative research methods use triangulation to increase the credibility of their findings (i.e. researchers rely on multiple data collection methods to check the authenticity of their results).” The study adopted interviews and written data sources, with attention on both written and spoken texts. The chosen data collection methods are discussed in the following sections.

3.4.1 Sociolinguistic Interview

Characterising both qualitative research and variationist sociolinguistics is the sociolinguistic interview. It is referred to as the fundamental, long-standing and standard tool for recording conversation in sociolinguistic research. It is, in actual fact, a misnomer (Hoffman, 2014; Tagliamonte, 2006) because it does not resemble an interview but a conversation. It was first used by Labov (1966) to gather data on how everyday speech revealed patterns of linguistic variation. Such interviews were further used for Labov (1969, 1972) to collect data on language variation

and analyse the linguistic features of the AAVE. Recently, Hala-hala (2021) adopted it to gather the data that revealed systematic linguistic features unique to LesE. Eventually, sociolinguistic interviews vary broadly and are influenced by the interlocutors and the rapport they create over time (Tagliamonte, 2006). Typically, the interviews are reported by Bijeikienė and Tamošiūnaitė (2013:45), as “topic-based” and the interviewer prepares the questions, along the topics such as life-threatening events (Starks & McRobbie-Utasi, 2001). As it is used to elicit natural conversation, an interview schedule including general and specific questions can be used to guide the conversation. The responsibility of the researcher should be to control the context by creating a casual conversation through asking questions as naturally as possible in order to extract the necessary linguistic variables as the researcher is the tool that collects data themselves and interpret it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

For this study, the researcher interviewed two teachers, each from both campuses of the selected higher-learning institution. The researcher conducted the 20-60 minutes one-on-one, semi-structured narrative interviews with Communication Skills teachers where they shared their English language teaching experience at the selected higher-learning institution and elsewhere. Also, the teachers were probed for the challenges they met when teaching grammar, in particular, tense. By the virtue of being semi-structured, the teachers were able to give natural experiences regarding the use of tense. Much as the interview proved to be more effective, Swann *et al.* (2004) noted that the use of equipment such as digital recorder tends to reduce the naturalness of the conversation.

Before continuing with the interview, I introduced myself and explained the purpose of the study. I further asked for permission from the teachers to audio-record the conversation and take notes in order to record relevant data linked to the research aim, questions and objectives of the study. I asked few questions to guide the interviewees and to probe for answers while still maintaining the conversation to be natural. Code-switching during the interview enabled the participants to express themselves freely. However, knowing that they were recorded, the participants tried by all means to use English throughout but sparingly used Sesotho. Because this study is linked to an academic institution and my presence aroused the participants’ expectation to use standard speech, probably there was observer’s paradox. However, it was overcome by adopting the Labovian techniques:

placing the recording device out of sight, letting the participant lead, displaying the relaxed demeanour while enjoying the conversation (Tagliamonte, 2006).

One advantage of using this method is that the interviewer has little control but only guides the interviewee with pre-planned questions and the interviewee becomes in charge of the conversation, given the topic, even though the interviewee may stray. In his study, Hala-hala (2021) also employed this method to explore the sociolinguistic aspects of English as used in Lesotho. In the next section, the second method of data collection is explicated.

3.4.2 Documentary Sources: Written Documents

Documentary sources refer to all recorded sources of information, irrespective of their content and form, about a specific topic or subject. They include both primary and secondary sources and may be published or unpublished. They are valuable and can be used in variety of research contexts. It is one of the various types of methods used by qualitative researchers to collect data, analysing pre-existing documents. Bowen (2009:27) defines document analysis it as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents-both printed and electronic materials. Examples of such materials include organisational and institutional documents.” For Creswell and Creswell (2018) qualitative documents include public and personal documents. Patton (2015:43) clarifies that for document analysis, “written materials and documents from organisational, clinical, or program records ... and written responses to open-ended surveys are collected.” Morgan (2022) notes that document analysis is a highly valuable approach yet underused, for different reasons.

Among the sources of data for sociolinguistic studies are written and spoken language corpora and other written sources (Bijeikienė & Tamošiūnaitė, 2013). Documents can be analysed for their current content, changes over time and the values they represent and the thoughts of those who produced them (Stark & Torrance, 2005). In their work, Creswell and Creswell (2018) highlight that qualitative research involves carefully selecting participants as well as documents that will best enable the researcher to understand the research problem and questions. In qualitative research, the researcher is the key instrument who collects data form multiple sources or by examining documents, among others. For this study, the researcher collected and examined the corpus of end-of-project reports and final examination answer papers written by students from two programmes. These texts represent the first-hand accounts of students’ learning and comprehension of course material taught. The data were collected from the Communication Skills

course final examination reports and SEP reports (context-based) written by the students from the same programmes, to capture tense usage in diverse contexts. I targeted final examination written academic texts, due to their classification as primary sources that offer valuable insights into the thoughts and learning experiences of individual students in how they use and understand language. I also believe there were few instances of ghost writing in examination papers.

For the purpose of this study, the students' final examination marked answer papers and assessment end-of-project report were collected and examined. These documents were examined and analysed for focal tenses in the following sections of the reports: methodology and findings sections for final examination marked answer papers and methodology and project evaluation sections for end-of-project reports. This corpus contributed mainly in shedding the light on answering the study research questions. Notably, Hala-hala (2021) did use such an approach in studying sociolinguistics of Lesotho; he analysed selected newspapers and magazine articles as well as Strategic plan documents. Chobokoane (2022) and Lekena (2023) also used this method to analyse content from the student's compositions for tense-related errors.

Information from pre-existing data is noted as much valuable as the one from the interviews and observations and it is wise to triangulate to improve the study's trustworthiness. This is because analysing pre-existing data sources is free from bias as the researcher has no influence on the outcome. However, the sources might not include other relevant information such as demographic information which other sources can provide (Hala-hala, 2021). The interviews and documentary sources helped the researcher to collect and analyse the systematic patterns. As a result, was able to determine whether the study fits within the theoretical framework as this study intends to investigate whether there is any morphosyntactic variation of tense in students' written academic texts at the target higher-learning institution in Lesotho. The following section outlines the ethical considerations adhered to during the study.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations refer to the principles that direct researchers in safeguarding the human rights of participants throughout the research process. Therefore, in research that involves human participants, it is essential to adhere to the ethics during data collection and processing to maintain the integrity of any research (Walliman, 2018). Majority of sociolinguistic research studies usually

engage human beings and sociolinguists primarily study their interaction through observation, recording and analysis. Ethical considerations were followed during the entire study process, including the design, data gathering, analysis and report writing. I ensured that I aligned my work with the worldwide academic conventions. As such, I adopted Harvard referencing in an effort to reference correctly, in-text and end-text, to avoid plagiarism. Through various channels, the students are continually advised to adhere to good academic practices by using Turnitin application to ensure credibility, as Hoffman (2014) indicates that all governments, funding agencies and universities set the guidelines and conform to them.

After presenting the study's design and methodology to the supervisor, permission was sought from the institution through my supervisor to conduct the study, before collecting data. I also wrote to the principal of the target institution to obtain consent to undertake the study on the site and sought guidance on the right procedure to follow in order to interview the teachers and have access to the documentary sources. Once permission was granted to conduct fieldwork, I abided by the fieldwork ethics during data collection, conforming to the NUL's code of ethics. I contacted the teachers concerned and requested an appointment because Wei (2020) alleges that ethnographers take care not hinder the daily activities of the participants, once permission to participate is granted.

Before entering the community, the researchers need to reflect on their ethical, moral and personal values (Dawson, 2002) as certain samples are more accessible than others due to various features of the population (Lewin, 2005). During data collection, I clearly identified myself, explained the purpose of the study. I also highlighted to the participants their rights to participate as well as their role in the study. As Hoffman (2014) noted, it is crucial to ensure the participants' security in their anonymity. On this basis, as I had entered the private life of the participants, assurance was given that their personal information would be withheld or use pseudonyms or alphanumeric designations will be considered (Hoffman, 2014). This has been in line with Tagliamonte's (2012) advice that, when the participant has agreed to participate, especially in sociolinguistic interview, guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. The concerned teachers and the campuses where they are based are therefore, referred to as teacher X and teacher Y and campus A and B, respectively in the study. During the interview sessions, for oral data, I engaged in a casual conversation with the participants as colleagues not in an interviewer-interviewee relationship. I also assured the participants that the collected data will be anonymised.

For the participants to provide natural data, the specific linguistic phenomenon being investigated was not disclosed, to avoid altered speech (Hoffman, 2014). When using the audio recorder, I adopted Labovian techniques to overcome the observer's paradox. Working with the documents, to a certain extent, does not involve ethical issues as may be the case with other qualitative methods (Morgan, 2022). However, in this case, in order to access the documentary sources and use them off-site, I was required to write a letter seeking permission to do so because they are official, confidential and institutional documents. Documentary sources were stored securely while in use and access to collected data was limited to authorised personnel. It has been my responsibility to manage and share, with the target institution, the findings of the study, when need be. Generally, the ethics have been adhered to throughout the research process, just like any research study. In the next section, I turn to data analysis procedure of the study.

3.6 Data Analysis

For this study, data collection process was followed by categorisation, transcription and analysis of spoken and written texts. Essentially, the collected data were analysed qualitatively, with minor statistical descriptions. Therefore, thematic analysis, guided by the principles of variationist sociolinguistics, was adopted for analysing the data. In alignment with the perspective of Dawson (2002:115), "when the data is analysed by themes, it is called thematic analysis. In this type of analysis, the data collection and analysis take place simultaneously." In order to effectively work with large data sets in qualitative research, Dawadi (2020) affirms that thematic analysis is used for systematic organisation and analysis. Thematic analysis sometimes involves a thorough search of themes in the data sets.

To facilitate the analysis for this investigation., firstly, a corpus of written documents was collected and then the themes, focal tenses (simple present tense, simple past and present perfect) which relate to the aims and research questions of the study, were identified. I then looked for salient recurring patterns and sporadic features. Morphosyntactic variants of tense usage were investigated in students reports in the methodology, findings and project evaluation sections in order to address the research questions and achieve the purpose of the study. Secondly, the oral data gathered were transcribed. This type of data helped in supporting data from the written texts in an effort to triangulate data sources for trustworthiness (Bowen, 2009).

Central to variation studies are the patterns and trends of the variants. After the data were collected, salient tense features in the sentences were analysed qualitatively. Early studies into language variation and change analysed variation quantitatively as the researchers counted the frequency of variants and assessed their distribution across a range of factors using tools such as logistic regression and variable rule regression (Tagliamonte, 2012). However, for this study, thematic analysis was used along the principle of accountability to find the patterns of variation in tenses. When the variables studied have been identified, Tagliamonte (2006) states that the principle of accountability, which defines accountability in variation analysis, offers an opportunity to include all variants in the variable context-whether they are realised or unrealised system elements. Although thematic analysis has been chosen because of the ease of identifying themes and simplicity to apply as well as flexibility to suit various topics, it has been ascertained that it can overlook some important nuances. In the next section, follows the conclusion.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the study's design and methodology. It has further discussed the demographic information of the target higher-learning institution in Lesotho, the research site for this study. It has also deliberated on the qualitative design on which this study is premised, whose principles influenced the choice of sampling techniques, data collection methods as well as data analysis procedure. The research ethics and data analysis procedures have also been put forward. The following chapter presents, analyses and discusses the data collected through the tools discussed in this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents, analyses and discusses the findings of the study: *The Morphosyntactic Variation of Tenses in Students' Academic Texts: The Case of One Target Higher-learning Institution in Lesotho*. The data presented here is aimed to answer and address the following research questions and subsumed objectives: Is there any variation in the three tenses (simple past, simple present and present perfect) mainly used in academic writing by students at the target higher-learning institution in Lesotho? If any, to what extent does this variation exist? Why is there variation in the usage of these tenses? Therefore, this chapter provides the qualitative analysis of the patterns identified, with application of infrequent descriptive statistics.

4.1 Demographic Profiles

As noted in Chapter Three, narrative interviews and academic texts were the data collection techniques adopted. As mentioned earlier that the research site is the higher-learning institution, presented here is demographic profile of the participants. The data were drawn from the academic texts written by students whose age ranges between seventeen to late twenties. The students are English as a second language speakers, in their first and second years of study. These students have learnt the English language at least from Grade One and English has been the language of instruction from Grade Four (The Ministry of Education and Training, 2019). Also, they have been exposed to learning Communication and Study Skills at the target higher-learning institution in Lesotho. The following section presents, analyses and discusses the data.

4.2 Morphosyntactic Variation

As noted in Chapter Two, tense is one of the important components of grammar and it occurs within a sentence or a clause. As such tense is treated with the focus on morphosyntax. The data collected centered around morphosyntactic variation with the focus on the verb tenses such as the simple present, simple past and present perfect tenses drawn from the findings, methodology and evaluation sections of the texts, as mentioned earlier. In the next section, I present the data

comprising these tenses in turn, noting the salient features from the datasets. Below are the recurrent usages of the tenses gathered from the data.

4.2.1 The Simple Present Tense

In Chapter Two, the simple present tense was noted as the tense that describes things that occur frequently and are generally true. The focus here is on occurrences of the simple present tense, as per focal sections. Among its functions in academic writing it has been stated in Chapter Two that it presents the research findings that continue to be true (APA Manual, 2010). As such it has been observed to be used in different sections of the both types of reports with some deviations.

In the findings section of the investigative report written by first-year students, out of the 85 instances of the key tenses examined, the use of the simple present tense has been noted to be salient at 53 (62%), followed by the simple past tense at 32 (38%) and the present perfect tense at 0 (0%). This suggests that the simple present tense dominated the findings section of this type of report. Of the 53 tokens of this tense in this section, 22(42%) have been used in untoward context. It is worth noting that, usually, this section is written in a prose form as Bailey (2015) clarifies that though there is no single prescribed format that must be followed for academic writing, one of the features of academic texts is writing in paragraphs, varying the sentences length but the data revealed a different scenario. The students have been found to write this section in bullet form thus expressing their findings mainly in simple sentences yet for this section, it would be expected to be in a prose form, having a variety of sentences. This form of writing was observed among all the students, in this section and this could reflect improper instruction when it comes to this type of section. In this case, the simple present tense has neither been used to discuss the results and their implications nor to express truths or facts supported by research results that cannot change as recommended by the (APA Manual, 2010). The following are the typical deviations of the use of the simple present tense in this section:

- a) Playground ***are not maintained***.
- b) The teams ***does not have*** uniform.

The examples above demonstrate the wrong constructions in the simple present tense. As indicated in Chapter Two, in the simple present tense, the verb should agree with its subject in number (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). In a), the use of simple present tense has been depicted by the use of inaccurate auxiliary verb. The subject 'Playground' is singular and is followed by the auxiliary

verb 'are' which is used for plural subjects. If the intention is to refer to a single playground, the verb should be 'is' but if referring to multiple playgrounds, the subject should be pluralised. In b), the subject 'teams' is plural, but the verb 'does' is singular yet it has to be 'do.' Using the wrong auxiliary verb form suggests a lack of accuracy in the description of actions or states and can communicate unintended message. This finding is in line with Lebona (2019), who found both the inaccurate use of the auxiliary verbs and mismanagement of the subject-verb agreement in the compositions written by high school learners in Maseru. The inaccurate use of auxiliaries could be associated with limited exposure to English outside the classroom and lack of practice using auxiliary verbs in context. On the one hand, from the cognitive grammar perspective, these errors may indicate a cognitive processing issue where the students struggle with an understanding of singular versus plural forms and the rules of subject-verb agreement in the present tense. On the other hand, from the variationist sociolinguistic view, the incorrect forms may suggest influence from informal speech where the issue of agreement is not strictly observed or they may also highlight the influence of the student's linguistic background (low proficiency) or carelessness.

Another issue that has been observed is the deletion of the verbal –s marker in the simple present tense. The verbal s-marking indicates the grammatical function of a verb. As discussed in Chapter Two, Huddleston and Pullum (2002) specified that the simple present tense is observed in the base form of the verb and in particular, the third person singular verb form is marked with the suffix '-s'. However, zero verbal marking seems to be a tendency through which the students ignore the grammatical rules, especially simple present tense as in the following example below:

c) The coach *mistreat* other students.

In the above example, the *coach* serves as the subject of the sentence and *mistreat* as the main verb of the sentence. However, the verb appears to be incorrectly used in this context. It should be conjugated to agree with the subject as clearly indicated in Chapter Two (Pickett,1996). In the context of academic texts, the use of the present tense here may imply that the action is ongoing or habitual and needs to be marked with an –s to agree with the subject. The correct form should be *mistreats* to match the third-person singular subject *the coach*. The first-year students have been noted not to mark the verbs in the simple present tense. Otherwise, the findings section reports on past events or actions that have already occurred, the verb should be in the simple past tense and

should reflect that. In this case, the verb form does not reflect the appropriate tense for the context. The correct morphological form should include the past tense marker to reflect it as *mistreated*, if referring to a completed action as indicated particularly in the findings section where the choice of tense is crucial.

Also, literature shows that this type of error is prevalent among English language users. Greenbaum and Nelson (2002) show that the deletion of the –s marker is a non-standard form, common in spoken communication which should be avoided in written discourse. The occurrence of zero verbal-s marking may indicate lack of understanding of tense and agreement or linguistic transfer from the students' first language (L1). This finding was observed by Kareema and Fhirthous (2021) who revealed that students who had a problem with simple present tense were not able to apply tense morpheme appropriately; and Haimbodi's (2022) study, whose findings revealed inflectional errors in Oshiwambo ESL students' written work.

On the same note, Chele (2015) and Lebona (2019) also found inappropriate omission and addition of the third person in the simple present tense in Basotho students at the NUL and three selected high schools in Maseru. This finding echoes Makalela (2007) who found deletion as a simplifying approach in the logic of Bantu languages' subject-verb agreement, based on prefix system for noun classes particularly in Sepedi, Sesotho and Setswana. Also, this could be a feature denoting grammatical variation in African Englishes, particularly found in BSAE, where inflectional endings are not always marked (Schmied, 1991). Worth-noting is that the usages in examples could also be easy to recall thus echoing usage as in the cognitive grammar. The first-year students' use of the simple present tense may suggest an attempt to use familiar linguistic patterns. Probably, when they progress in their academic writing, there may be a shift in the way they perceive, recall and use tenses. In the field of variationist sociolinguistics, the error may reflect the influence of informal speech patterns, which are discouraged in scholarly texts.

Unlike the majority of the students who wrote the simple, choppy sentences in the bullet form using the simple present tense, those who wrote the sporadic complex sentence were still challenged by the appropriate tense to use in the matrix clause as in the typical example that follows:

d) It *is found* that the lecturers use time for classes for teaching.

In the above example, the student has used the simple present tense, in the passive voice *is found* to depersonalise the statement and write objectively, which, as established by Lynch and Anderson (2013) in Chapter Two, is the common practice in academic writing. However, it has been shown that conventionally, when reporting the findings, the simple past tense is used for the reporting verbs in main clauses to make reference to the previous occurrence of giving information to the reader (Hinkel, 2004). The APA (2010) manual reiterates that when writing a report, the study or investigation is complete, thus, a need to use the simple past tense to explain the findings. Alternatively, the student may use this reporting verb in the present tense to show the present relevance of the finding. Cognitively, this error may suggest awareness of the conventions of academic writing especially in the findings section while in the view of variationist sociolinguistics this could indicate the reflection of the influence of the students' linguistic background on their writing.

In the methodology section written by the first-year students, the occurrences of the focal tenses were 109. Eight of them represented the occurrence of the simple present with 38% accounting for the deviations. In Chapter Two, the APA Manual (2010) highlighted that the simple present tense is essentially used for general statements about the methods. The sporadic use of this tense in this section implies that the students might be aware of the predominant tense used in this section as most of the presented information was completed at a certain point in the past. However, those students who used the simple present tense used it in the wrong context as follows:

- e) Observation *is used* on sports day.
- f) Consultative meeting with 20 students that [] chosen randomly *is made*.
- g) Questionnaire sheets *are sent* to 15 students that *are chosen* randomly.

The examples above are in the simple present tense and passive voice and as such, order of the subject and object have changed. As Herring (2016) indicated in Chapter Two, the passive structure allows the use of the 'to be' auxiliaries which the students got correct. However, by the virtue of being in the methodology section reporting complete actions, as indicated in Chapter Two that, in the past, the auxiliary verbs should be in the past. To fit the context, the auxiliary verbs were supposed to be in the past as in, *was used, was made, were sent and were chosen*. while the

original sentences demonstrate morphosyntactic variation in tense found in academic writing, the use of the past tense is more appropriate when describing completed research procedures in the methodology section. The presence of these errors may indicate issues with the cognitive processes such as remembering during writing leading to challenges in applying grammatical rules consistently in the course of their learning.

In the second-year student's methodology section, among the 636 tokens of focal tenses used, 125 represented the instances of the use of the simple present tense. Out of the 125 occurrences of this tense in this section, 70 (56%) used the present tense in inappropriate contexts. The use of the past tense in the methodology section was pointed to in Chapter Two by the Writing Center at UNC Chapel Hill that pointed to the use of the simple present tense in this section for making general statements or statements about what is currently true. Also, the students have been noted to use this tense saliently in this section as in the following extracts:

- h) *Knead* dough using warm water, sugar, salt and yeast. (DCS)
- i) I usually *wash* them, then add in the pot, *season* and *boil* for at least 25 minutes. (DCS)
- j) ... I just *measure* it into the plastic, then *display*. (DCS)
- k) After irrigating, we *cover* table with a heavy plastic. (DIA)
- l) Daily we *irrigate* with clean water about 2-3 times a day...(DIA)
- m) Mushroom *is* then *put* in foam trays and cling wrap *is used* to wrap ... (DIA)

The second-year learners have also been noted to be using the simple present tense in the methodology section to express the food preparation steps for the recipes. Sentence h) uses the imperative mood, which is common in recipes and instructions and not in academic writing. It directly gives the command to perform the action. The rest of the sentences are in the simple present tense yet they have to be in the past, based on the type of action they express. The present tense has been used in the methodology section of the end-of-project report, even in the instances where the students had to use the simple past tense. As the above sentences outline the steps in the preparation process and express activities which were complete at a definite point in the past, their use in this context requires the use of the past tense (APA Manual, 2010). The fact that even the second-year students used this tense in this section might suggest lack of language proficiency in using this tense in this section. This suggests that their understanding of academic writing skills might not be developed as they should be for their level of study. Thus, their understanding and

application of academic writing conventions might be challenged. The presence of errors may suggest issues with the cognitive representation of time which ultimately reflects in their writing. Additionally, this usage could be attributed to the language proficiency level of the learners. The minimum entry requirements for admission into the college, as presented in Chapter Three, may have the implications for this continued usage. Most of the students could be challenged by using English language leading to continued misunderstanding of the conventions of academic writing, particularly regarding tense usage. Besides, based on the assumptions of cognitive grammar, Langacker (1987) assumes that exposure to and experience in using the linguistic structures contribute to their entrenchment.

Also, the above sentences are not the *that*-clause that is why their use is irregular. In the *that*-clause, the part of the sentence that follows in the subordinate clause can be expressed in the simple present tense. Heinkel (2002: 187) clarifies that in the *that*-clauses, after the reporting verbs “the past tense generally shifts to the present” and learners should be taught about this as reporting verbs are frequent in academic writing. The trend in the usage of simple present tense by the students deviates from this usage, particularly in this section. This usage might be pointed to the role played by the instructional practices because oral data from the teachers showed that more emphasis is placed on the simple present tense and the students might overgeneralise its use. Thus, this could reflect the instruction the students received. Otherwise, it could also be associated with the students' level of language proficiency and lack of familiarity with academic writing norms, which could impact on their tense choices. This finding corroborates Saeed Abdul-Majeed (2016), who reported the simple present tense as occurring most frequently in the results and discussion sections of the English theses.

For the evaluation section, there were 171 cases of the tenses under investigation. The occurrence of the simple present was at 38 (22%). The project evaluation section gives an objective assessment of an ongoing or completed project to determine its relevance and level of achievement. In this context, this section assesses the activities of the complete projects. Therefore, the simple past tense or present perfect would be preferred depending on the nature of the activity reported. In Chapter Two, the APA Manual (2010) highlighted that the simple present tense is used to present the conclusions. However, Yarber and Yarber (2010) indicated that, if the action that is expressed started in the past and continues in the present, the present perfect is used. Of the 38 tokens of the

simple present tense in this section, 12 (32%) seemed to deviate from conventional way of using this tense in this section as follows:

- n) We *learn* how best marketing can be done effectively in business. (DIA)
- o) The project *needs* to be funded because we did not have capital. (DIA)

The above extracts show the typical recurring use of simple present tense verbs by SEP second-year students for the project evaluation section. The students used the simple present tense to evaluate actions that happened during the project as if they are current, which would better be expressed in present perfect or past tense as suggested by (Yarber & Yarber, 2010). This irregular use of simple tense might indicate the embedded habits from previous instruction at the first-year level. Mason University Writing Center (2017) highlighted in Chapter Two that, in academic writing, simple present tense is the default tense because of its multiple functions. Hence, when the writer is not sure about the tense to use, they tend to opt for simple present tense. This finding is comparable to Btoosh (2019), who found that in academic texts such as the assignments and essays written by the Arabic learners in higher education, the overuse of simple present was the tendency. Alternatively, the use of simple past or present perfect tense would be preferred in this case. This usage could be associated with Marungudzi's (2016) finding that one of the features of World Englishes is that complex tenses are avoided.

To tie up this section on, the analysis of the use of the simple present tense across the different sections of the two different types of reports written by learners at different levels of study has revealed adherence to and some deviations from the conventional norms, contextually and structurally. In both types of reports, the deviant usages seem to be recurring among the students from the two groups. In the next section follows the presentation and discussion of the findings on the simple past tense.

4.2.2 The Simple Past Tense

Of great significance is the use of the simple past tense in the reports. The structure and usage of the simple past tense in English were explained in detail in Chapter Two where Crystal (2008) pointed out that the past tense, in grammar, describes an action that took place before the statement is made. The past form of a verb was explained by Pickett (1996) to involve the application of the past tense morpheme marker *-d* or *-ed* for regular verbs while the irregular verbs do not follow a

predictable pattern. When applying these morphemes, Payne (2011) advised users to be careful and avoid overgeneralising this rule. The use of this tense was noticed in various focal subdivisions of the two types of reports, namely, the findings, methodology and evaluation.

Of the 85 instances of the tenses subject to analysis in the findings section, 32 (38%) represents the tokens of the simple past tense. This implies insignificant salience looking at the context in which this tense is used. This section typically requires the use of the simple past tense to report specific results from the research that have been completed (APA Manual, 2010). A lower prevalence of the simple past may indicate that students do not fully understand the conventions of academic writing, particularly regarding the appropriate tense for reporting research results. Sometimes, this might imply the focus shift from form to the content as Hinkel (2004) shows that the tenses used to align with written discourse rules may compromise accuracy. Among the 32 occurrences of the simple past tense in this section, 1(3%) used it improperly and applied it as follows:

- a) Few students *announced* that they do not have a coach.

The extract above is in the simple past tense and is used in the right context. The grammatical structure of the sentence is correct, with a subject, verb and complement clause but the problem lies with the main verb of the sentence. While the main verb ‘announced’ is in the simple past tense, indicating that the action of announcing occurred in the past, the grammatical error that is realised in the sentence is the misspelling of ‘announced.’ The spelling error ‘anounced’ instead of ‘announced’ could be attributed to interference from Sesotho as the students’ L1. Cognitively, this reflects a strategy where learners rely on familiar linguistic patterns resulting in errors when they apply them when writing. From the variationist sociolinguistics perspective, Kachru (1986) posits that this can be viewed as the reflection of the sociolinguistic context in which they learn English.

In the methodology section written by the first-year students, the use of the simple past tense has been observed to be salient. Out of the 109 occurrences of the studied tenses in this section, 100 (92%.) represent the use of the simple past tense. Based on the literature in Chapter Two, the simple past tense is used to recount complete activities (Crystal, 2008; Ngoh, 1980). An increase in the frequency of the simple past tense in this section may be alluded to the type of the activities reported as reporting usually employs the simple past tense (APA Manual, 2010). This high

prevalence indicates that students understand and follow the academic writing norms, which are required for clarity and competence in scholarly writing. Although 92% of this tense was used conventionally, 9% of the instances of the simple past tense were used as in the following excerpts:

b) The students *were choosen* randomly for... (DCS)

c) Questionnaire *were give* to twenty students... (DIA)

The above examples have clear grammatical structures with a subject, verb phrase indicating the tense, among others, however, the problem lies with how the participials have been formed. The learners have used the inappropriate past participles in the passive form of verbs, the participials are not properly constructed, morphologically. This suggest that they could not construct the sentences in the simple past tense passive voice correctly as they missed the participial form or marker. The students might not be aware that in b) the participle is *chosen* and not *choosen*. In c), the students have not applied the participial marker, resulting in zero participial. This suggests lack of proficiency on the principal parts of a verb form, in the passive voice. As this construction is a bit complex, Langacker (1987) indicates that the mind of the students might not recollect them easily. Also, when the students construct sentences, they may prioritise meaning over grammatical accuracy resulting in lack of accuracy (Hinkel, 2004). As the students are at the first year of study of institution of higher learning and have just been introduced to principles of academic writing, this might change as they get used to reading and writing for academic purposes. Again, this may be associated with lack of understanding of English grammar rules. This finding echoes Haimbodi (2022), which explored and revealed how the students' native language (Oshiwambo) affected their writing in English, including verb tense use.

In the methodology section written by the second-year students, the simple past tense has been found to be recurring. Of the 636 instances of the tenses under investigation in this section, the simple past tense has been found recurring at 493 (78%) in this section. The usage of the simple past tense has been referred to in Chapter Two by the APA Manual (2010) and the George Mason University Writing Center (2017) to recount completed actions or procedures of the experiments. The significant use of the simple past tense in this section is consistent with academic reporting practices, crucial for clarity and coherence in academic writing. This implies that the students are

aware of the appropriate use of this tense in this section. However, 1% of the occurrences used by the second-year students have been observed in this section as follows:

- d) The project undertaking *begun* on the 1st December 2022.
- e) Each seedling *costed* M1.00.
- f) They *were feed* at 7:00 a.m. and 17:00 p.m. every day.
- g) Another green beans *were sowed...*

In the above sentences, the first two d) and e) demonstrate the inappropriate formation of the past tense of the irregular verbs. *Begun* has been erroneously used as the simple past tense of *begin*, while the correct one is *began*. Herring (2016) explained in Chapter Two that the past simple verb structure is merely the past-tense form of a verb and does not require any auxiliary verbs to provide meaning. *Begun* is the past participle form of *begin* which is usually used with auxiliary verbs to form the present perfect. Of great significance is that the learners are quite aware that ‘begin’ is an irregular verb and does not follow the typical past tense formation rules. In this event, the learners might have confused the simple past with the past participle form. In e), a regular past tense morpheme has been inaccurately applied to the root verb *cost*. *Cost* is an irregular verb too and its past tense form remains unchanged as highlighted in Chapter Two that some irregular forms are identical in the present, past and participle forms while others have different three forms. The use of ‘costed’ is limited to few contexts in financing and in this context, it reflects a misunderstanding of how irregular verbs function in English. As stated in Chapter Two, the irregular verbs do not take the regular past tense form ‘-ed’ (Geenbaum & Nelson, 2002). The students have overgeneralised the regularisation rule of weak verbs. The trend in c) and d) continues from the methodology section written by the first-year students and it shows inability to construct the participles.

All these constructions hamper the intended meaning of the writer therefore, this implies lack of proficiency in the target language. The extent to which the students are exposed or instructed may also impact on how they internalise the rules of irregular verbs in English. This finding corroborates other studies (Haimbodi, 2022), which revealed this irregular patterning among Oshiwambo tertiary learners and Lebona (2019), which found the similar irregularity among high school students. As articulated by Langacker (1987), the students’ cognitive processing of language may prompt them to apply normal morphological rules such as adding ‘-ed’ to an

irregular verb as language use relies on cognitive processes. From that variation perspective, the errors may suggest their educational background and exposure to formal instruction.

From the evaluation section, the simple past tense has been saliently used with 114 (67%) instances. The uses of this tense in this section have been highlighted in Chapter Two as mainly to describe events or conditions that occurred, existed, and were finished at a previous period (Mavis, 2011). Since the evaluation section typically summarises and interprets the results of the research or project, often referring to completed actions and findings, it is conventional to use the simple past tense (APA Manual, 2010). The high prevalence suggests that the students still report completed actions yet they should be more focused on discussing the implications and interpretations of the findings. While the simple past tense has been used positively in this section, it is important to note that other tenses such as the present perfect may be appropriate in certain instances within the assessment section. However, of great observation is that among the 114, occurrences, 2% has been noted to be irregular, pointing to the typical use of American English in the simple past tense as in the following excerpts:

- h) I *practiced* weed control using ...
- i) I *learned* the perfect way of ...
- j) We *got to make* profit ...

The preceding examples show the use of American English structures as an alternative for British English in formal written texts. In a) and b) the past tenses ‘practiced’ and ‘learned’ are standard forms in the American English, where the verb ‘practice’ is used in the past tense as ‘practiced’ (with a ‘c’) without variation but in British English, ‘practised’ (with an ‘s’) is the correct spelling when used as a verb. Certain spelling variants are unique to British writing (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002) and their use in academic texts is not favoured. In c), the phrase ‘got to’ is an informal expression that the students used to express that they accumulated the profit. However, it does not reflect past tense on its own right. Its usage is colloquial and conversational therefore, it is discouraged in academic writing. As indicated in Chapter Three, as the British ex-colony, Lesotho has adopted British English as an official language, so the British English is expected to be used in formal situations such as the education domains, in particular at the target higher-learning institution in Lesotho as the research site. However, there seems to be a trend in the use of

American English variants and colloquial language. Quirk *et al.* (1985) show that academic journals and textbooks typically use British spelling. This usage suggests lack of knowledge in the distinction between the usage of the two variants of English. For one who is not familiar with this distinction, it possibly causes a confusion. Cognitively, this usage could show that the students are not aware of the orthographic distinction between British English and American English for such verbs as they are homophonous words too. This usage highlights the importance of consistency in constructions (spelling and verb forms) based on the variety of English being used. In academic writing, adhering to either American or British English conventions is essential for clarity. As cognitive grammar posits that grammar is meaningful and language usage is shaped by context, the choice of the spellings could reflect the students' linguistic environment and the tendencies which could be acquired from the social contexts such as social media. In the view of variationist sociolinguistics, their age, as mentioned earlier, could account for the variation observed.

In summary, the use of the simple past tense has been noted to be salient in the methodology sections of both reports written by the first-year and second-year students, followed by the evaluation section. In the next section, the use of the present perfect tense is analysed and discussed.

4.2.3 The Present Perfect Tense

The basics of the English present perfect tense's structure and usage were discussed in Chapter Two reflecting that it describes an action that started in the past and continues in the present (Yarber & Yarber, 2010). From the sections explored in this study, the use of the present perfect has been sporadic. In the findings section this tense can be used and it is important to use it carefully. However, it is important to report that the findings section completely lacked the present perfect tense as its occurrence is 0%, implying that none of the students used it in this section. This finding is comparable to Fuchs' (2016) study which presented that the use of present perfect tense has declined in the varieties of English worldwide, though the degree differs among the varieties. On the same token, Werner and Fuchs (2017) noticed that this tense to be slowly disappearing in the Nigerian English variety. Besides, Saeed Abdul-Majeed (2016) found that the present perfect as of secondary importance in academic discourse, after simple present and simple past (considered primary) tenses consecutively. Based on the principles of cognitive grammar, the mind is able to retrieve the simpler structures before the complex ones. The simple tenses such as the simple past and simple present seem to be more popular when it comes to writing because they are

easy to process. Its absence may also be due to a lack of awareness regarding its appropriate use in this section of the academic texts. The absence of the present perfect tense in this section may indicate that first-year students do not completely understand its role and value in academic writing. Otherwise, it may also indicate that the level of education as a social factor could imply that the first-year students are still developing their skills in academic writing, in comparison to their counterparts in second year. The likelihood is that they might change as they progress and are exposed to academic writing practice for them to better express their arguments in scholarly writing.

The slight change in the frequency of use of the present perfect in the methodology section of the reports that the first-year students wrote was found. For this section, the occurrences of the present perfect tense increased to 1%. Out of the 109 tokens of tenses in this section, this tense was found to be sporadic. The slight change in the frequency of this tense in the methodology section of first-year student reports can be interpreted as a sign of developing awareness about this tense. As clearly stipulated in Chapter Two, this tense is used to connect the past to the present (Ngoh, 1980). However, much as it has been used, it has been applied to inappropriate context as follows:

- a) The chairperson *has observed* that during the sports time, few students go to the grounds.

The use of the present perfect in the example shows that the action has the present relevance yet it was carried out and completed at a definite time in the past before writing the report. The appropriate tense to use in this context would be the simple past tense mainly because most of the actions or procedures expressed in the methodology section were completed in the past. Therefore, in relation to the guidelines provided by the APA Manual (2010), it is necessary to use the simple past tense. This usage could imply lack of familiarity with academic conventions that the methodology section normally describes completed actions or uncertainty about when to use the simple past and present perfect. However, looking at the percentage of prevalence, it could be carelessness associated to lack of proof-reading. Otherwise the students might be trying to emphasise the ongoing relevance of the action. The use of *has observed* reflects the cognitive grammar perspective where grammar serves as a symbolic representation of the knowledge and the experience that the speaker has in the use of tense. Therefore, this reflects that grammar is not just structural but meaningful.

The data also revealed the continued increase in the use of the present perfect tense in the methodology section of the reports written by the second-year students, though it is still sporadic. The use by second-year students reflects an increase from 1% in first-year students to 2%. This marks a significant improvement in students' academic writing skills. It indicates that some of the second-year students are aware that the present perfect tense can be employed in academic contexts. However, some are not able to differentiate the between the use of simple past tense and present perfect tense as in the following sentence:

b) After we *have uncovered* the trays, we put them on the table and irrigate them.

In the example above, the present perfect tense has been used as an alternative to simple past tense. While the example highlights the use of the present perfect tense, the use of the simple past tense might be preferred in this section because the action expressed was completed at a certain point in the past. Although this tense has been inappropriately applied in this context because for complete activities, the simple past tense is used (Yarber & Yarber, 2010), this shows that the second-year students are aware of the use of various tenses in academic writing even though the percentage is still insignificant. This tense choice suggests that the action of uncovering is seen as complete and relevant to the steps in the methodology section, thus reflecting the students' conceptualisation of time from the cognitive grammar view.

This low frequency could show that they are aware of the dominant tense in this section, which they ultimately used as reflected in Section 4.2.2. Thus, this particular usage could just be a coincidence caused by the confusion between using the simple past and the present perfect. As presented by Lynch and Anderson (2013), the present perfect tense emphasises the present context, while referring to previous events. This means that it is used for actions that occurred in the past but are still relevant or connected to the present. However, Lynch and Anderson continue to show that scholars frequently opt for present perfect over simple past when focus is on the current effects of previous events. Usually, the time phrases that allude to periods that are either ongoing or have recently ended are frequently employed with the present perfect tense. Cognitive grammar submits that experience is crucial in understanding certain linguistic features. As the second-year students have a better experience in academic writing than the first year students, their cognitive development is reflected by varying tenses. This finding echoes Kareema and Fhirthous (2021) that found that the number of students who made errors in using tenses confused present perfect

and simple past tenses because they did not understand them. Likewise, this could suggest a feature present in World Englishes, particularly the emerging Lesotho English. Hala-hala (2021) found this feature as the levelling process between the preterite and the perfect aspect in Lesotho.

Another case of significant increase of salience in the use of the present perfect tense from 2% in the methodology section to 11% in the evaluation section, both written by the second-year students, is a notable finding. The evaluation section assesses and critically evaluates the results, relating them to results, as such, the present perfect can be used to show the relationship of the past with the present (Ngoh, 1980). The significant rise in the present perfect tense usage indicates that second-year students have a better understanding of its purpose and significance in this section of the scholarly text. However, 2% of the occurrences reflected that the learners used it as follows:

c) I *have learned* skills on processing...

d) We *have learned* to work as a team...

These examples show that the students have used the present perfect in this section to express the actions that happened while still doing their project holding the current impact. The phrasal verb, *have learned*, indicates a completed action with present relevance as Ngoh (1980) highlighted in Chapter Two that it is used to show such a relationship. These instances indicate the correct constructions but confusion with the orthographic representation of the past participle that forms the present perfect. The constructions are more inclined towards American English yet the grammar that is used in schools is British English-oriented, as indicated in Chapter Three that English is the official language that Lesotho inherited from the ex-colonist and continues to be used in the education system (The Constitution of Lesotho, 2009). This suggests lack of adherence to the expected linguistic norms in academic writing because the use of the American English is not favoured. The choice of American English spellings could be influenced the students' familiarity with or their desire to use them. Thus, from the cognitive grammar perspective, it could suggest a disconnect between how students conceptualise language and the expected academic writing norms.

Looking at the students' level of study, 11% representation of the present perfect tense in this section is not sound, based on Lynch and Anderson's (2013) view that academic writers prefer the present perfect tense over the past tense when they are particularly interested in the current implications of recent occurrences. However, it may be because they are not aware of its use as

oral data indicated that, when teaching tense, the teachers put more emphasis on simple present tense and simple past tense, successively. The data from the interviews also affirmed that the students use it sparingly and this finding is comparable to Saeed Abdul-Majeed (2016) finding where the present perfect was noted as of secondary importance in academic discourse, after simple present and simple past (considered primary) tenses consecutively.

To give the broad picture of the usage of the tenses, this analysis began by pointing to the tense analysed, its frequency of occurrence in each section, how it has been used. Generally, in the reports examined, the researcher found 1001 tokens of the focal tenses, with attention directed to the sections being explored 85 from the findings, 109 from the methodology written by the first-year students, 636 from the methodology written by the second-year students, 171 from the evaluation. The simple past tense has been found to be recurring at 739 (74%), followed by the simple present tense at 224 (22%) and lastly the present perfect at 38 (4%). The following section concludes the chapter.

4.3 Conclusion

The chapter has provided the presentation, analysis and interpretation of the findings as observed, per identified themes. Furthermore, the chapter reported findings on the tense usage in academic texts by SEP learners, both the first and second year. The study has revealed systematic patterns in the use of simple present, past tense and the present perfect tense. It has found salient tenses to be the simple present tense and simple past tense while the sporadic one is the present perfect tense. The simple present tense has been found to dominate the findings section of the first-year student followed by the simple past tense. The simple past tense has been found to be a salient feature of methodology sections of the reports written by both the first- and second-year students followed by the few instances of the simple present tense and the least use of the present perfect tense. In the evaluation section, the past tense has been found to dominate, followed by the simple present tense and the present perfect tense, successively. The frequency of the simple present tense use has also been found to be high among the first-year students, followed by the simple past tense and the present perfect tense. For both groups, for the methodology sections, the majority of the sentences were written in the passive voice and the researcher observed that the passive voice was used mostly by the DIA as opposed to DCS students. Generally, the simple past tense has been predominant among the second-year students followed by the simple present tense and the present

perfect tense. These findings could probably be closely linked with the type of instruction the students received and the context of writing the reports, as revealed by the oral data. The next chapter presents the conclusions of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

5.0 Introduction

Chapter Five concludes this study by presenting the summary of the main findings of the study as well as its limitations. This chapter further provides the suggestions for further research. The conclusion section brings an end to this particular chapter and the overall study. At this point, it is logical to draw attention, once again, to the aim, research questions and objectives of the study, assessing the study's success in meeting its aim. To restate its aim, this study set out to investigate the morphosyntactic variation of tenses in students' academic texts at the target higher-learning institution in Lesotho. Using qualitative research approach, this study aimed at answering the following research questions: Is there any variation in the three tenses (the simple present, the simple past and present perfect) mainly used in academic writing by students at the target higher-learning institution in Lesotho? If any, to what extent does this variation exist? And why is there variation in the usage of these tenses? In an effort to answer the stated research questions, the subsumed objectives were also achieved. The findings presented next, indicate the tense usage during the academic year 2022/2023 and establish the study's success in achieving the set objectives and informing the conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Summary of the Main Findings

Presented in this section are the main findings of the study which have been observed for the usage of the simple present, the simple past and the present perfect tenses in academic texts at the target higher-learning institute, obtained through the interviews and written texts. The researcher observed that tense is one of the crucial grammatical aspects in language use, particularly in academic texts which English language users should note its use in order to situate the actions, events and activities within the time framework. Despite the fact that there are certain academic writing conventions, variation in the use of the three tenses was observed. As noted in Chapter Two, morphosyntactic variation is the differences in how words are combined into sentences in different dialects (Schilling-Estes, 2006). This type of variation is concerned with variation in the form and function of language at morphological and syntactic levels.

After a thorough examination of the written academic texts, systematic, notable variations in the usage on simple present, simple past and present perfect were found. In reiteration of Btoosh (2019) the study revealed the frequent use of the simple past tense in students' academic works, followed by the simple present and a limited usage of the present perfect tense was found. Further, the study found the systematic patterns in the use of the simple present, simple past and present perfect tenses across different sections of students' academic reports. The findings indicate that the simple present tense and simple past tense are the most salient features, while the present perfect tense is used more sporadically.

In the findings section, the use of simple present tense has been discovered as prominent followed by the simple past tense among by the first-year students and this finding echoes (Saeed Abdul-Majeed, 2016). Thus, the use of simple present tense has turned out to be the salient feature while the use of simple past tense was sporadic. Both the first-and second- year students displayed a systematic unconventional use of the simple present tense in the findings and methodology sections. This could point to the instruction the students received as the teachers emphasised the need for learners to have basic skills in using simple present tense in different sections of the academic paper or transfer of instruction from the specific discipline as the DCS students demonstrated its high use. Some of the deviations such as verbal-s marker deletion are categorised as one of the features of World Englishes, in particular BSAE (Makalela, 2007).

The methodology section of both types of reports written by the first-and second-year students has been noted to be characterised by the salient use of the simple past tense. Majority of the students at both levels demonstrated proficiency in the use of simple past tense specially to recount complete actions and activities. Its frequent usage also adopted the passive voice, recommended in academic papers (Lynch & Anderson, 2013). The simple present tense and present perfect tense are used less frequently in this section.

The evaluation section has demonstrated a more balanced use of tenses. The frequency of the simple past tense remains high, followed by the simple present tense and the present perfect tense. This indicates that students are developing an awareness of the various uses the simple present and present perfect tense. However, the students have been observed to level the usage of the simple

past tense with the present perfect tense. Such usage may be associated with the levelling process between past tense and present perfect, as found in World Englishes studies such as (Hala-hala, 2021).

Worth-noting is that the frequency of the simple present tense usage was higher among first-year students compared to second-year students. The simple past tense and present perfect tense were more prevalent in the writing of second-year students. This suggests that as the students progress in their studies, they become more competent and skilled at applying various tenses in academic writing. Among the three investigated tenses, the use present perfect has been sporadic. It has been observed that the students used it sparingly in the end-of project report. This reflects the decreasing usage, also noted in the World Englishes and Nigerian English Variety (Fuchs, 2016; Werner & Fuchs, 2017).

Based on the findings, therefore, the study concludes that the students grasp the conventions of using the focal tenses in academic writing as they progress with their studies. The consistent usage of the simple past tense in the methodology sections among the students from both levels indicates the knowledge of when to effectively use this tense therefore communicating effectively. The use of the present perfect tense challenges the students but its increased usage in the evaluation sections, particularly among second-year students displays awareness and this could be linked to level of education and engagement in academic writing. Thus, the results point to a need for targeted instruction where instructional interventions addressing tense variation can be implemented.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

Like any other study, though the study has been able to gather rich data, one of its limitations was the context as it could not represent all the academic programmes at the target institution, based on the sample size. The sample could have included the focus group discussion with the students on tense choice and usage in academic texts and interviewing discipline-specific teachers on the awareness of the tenses recommended in academic writing. Also, the data collection methods could have included interviews with the students and not just teachers. The scope of the tenses may, as well, overlook other tenses which may be of significance. The last possible shortcoming was

inability to structure the study to be comparative between two institutions. Despite the limitations identified, this study has successfully achieved its primary aim and will provide insightful information about tense usage in the target institution. It has also contributed significantly by shedding the light on the less explored area in the target institution and offering a ground for future studies whose intention is to explore patterns in different institutions. Furthermore, the findings of this study may inform the teaching practice at the target institution.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

As indicated previously in Section 1.3, the aim of this study was to explore morphosyntactic variation in students' academic texts at the target higher-learning institution focusing on the usage of three tenses (simple past, simple present and present perfect) employed in academic writing. This study found the varying frequencies on the use of the simple present tense, the simple past tense and the present perfect tense, with the simple past tense as the salient tense and the present perfect as the sporadic tense. The future research

could investigate the use of similar tenses in other sections of similar academic reports at the same institution. This may inform the department that offers Communication and study Skills course to tailor their teaching. As this course is aimed at equipping the students with knowledge and skills in grammar for academic purposes and beyond, further investigation could consider exploring other grammatical aspects such as word order in sentence construction, punctuation and spelling in the same texts written.

Morphosyntactic variation of the use of similar tenses in academic texts in different contexts, that is, those written by other students from other institutions of higher learning could also be explored. The use of other tenses which are believed to be rare in academic writing might also require further research.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has summarised the main findings of, drawn conclusions, highlighted the limitations of this study and suggested areas for further research. Based on the findings, the study concludes that there is morphosyntactic variation of the tenses commonly used in academic writing, particularly in the reports written by the first-year and-second year students at the target higher-

learning institution. The usage of the tenses under investigation has been noted to resonate with other studies on tense and aspect in academic writing. The context of writing and the level of study played a significant role in realising the differences. Overall, the general trend of usage reflecting variation ultimately impacted the intended meaning particularly within academic texts which require the use of appropriate tenses for clarity and precision.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Sample of sociolinguistic interview questions for target teachers

- a) What is your experience in teaching English language?
- b) What are the challenges you have met particularly when teaching grammar?
- c) Which grammar aspect(s) do you believe challenge the students mostly and how do you address them?
- d) If mentions tense, which tenses do you put more emphasis on when teaching and what strategies do you use to help students grasp those tense concepts effectively?
- e) Have you noticed any variation/ differences in using tense among different groups, for example DHE and DIA students? What do you believe contributes towards any variation?
- f) Any other comments?

Appendix 2: Letter requesting permission to conduct interviews and document analysis

Lithoteng Ha Seleso
P.O. Box 7189
Maseru 100

10th May 2024

The Principal
Lesotho Agricultural College
Private Bag A4
Maseru 100

Dear Madam

Re: Application for permission to conduct a study at Lesotho Agricultural College

I cordially wish to request the permission to conduct a research study about variation in English as a second language and medium of instruction in Lesotho. I am currently studying for Master of Arts in English Language and linguistics at the National University of Lesotho (NUL). The title of my study is 'Morphosyntactic variation of tense in students essays: The case of the Lesotho Agricultural College (LAC)' and is supervised by Dr Mokhoele Aaron Hala-hala from NUL (phone: +266 5840 3924 and e-mail: ma.hala-hala@nul.ls or mokhoeleahalahala@gmail.com.) I have chosen LAC as my research site for my study because I am interested in possible variants in language use by students from various programmes, and not performance errors.

When granted permission, I wish to be introduced as a student. My plan is to interview selected, particularly second year students, from different programmes, observe selected classes and analyse selected past examination essays from different programmes. The information from interviews, observations and documents will be kept anonymous, and confidential, but accessible to authorized personnel only.

I am looking forward for your response, at your earliest convenience and I thank you for your anticipated cooperation.

Yours faithfully



Mamotena Ntlhaba

(MA student 200101766)

