CHAPTER FOUR

DISCOURSE MODES AND BASES IN VERGIL’S AENEID

Suzanne M. Adema

1 Introduction

The main story of the Aeneid starts when Aeneas is sailing towards Italy and ends when the hero has reached these shores and kills Turnus, thereby ending a war and paving the way for Rome’s foundation. In between, the narrator of the Aeneid engages in a wide variety of activities: he communicates with the Muses, his readers and his characters, he describes and he tells the story. The aim of this paper is to give an overview of these activities. That is, to give an indication of the different ways in which Vergil presents his epic.

These ways of presentation may be described by means of two parameters: discourse modes (Smith 2003) and the base from which the narrator chooses to use these discourse modes (Cutrer 1994). First, I will discuss the characteristics of the four discourse modes occurring in the Aeneid, focusing on tense usage. The second section explains, by means of the concept base, that the narrator does not only present his story from his own point in time, but that he also has another point in time available for his presentation, namely reference time. This insight will be used to show that each of the four discourse modes is also used from a base in reference time, and thus

---

1 I would like to thank Harm-Jan van Dam and Caroline Kroon for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2 I use this term in a strict sense: the moment that is considered in a particular part of the story is the reference time (Kamp & Rohrer 1983). The term reference point or time is also used by Hinrichs (1986) and Partee (1983). As the narrator continues his story, the reference time constantly shifts to a next part of the story time (Partee 1983: 254; Dry 1983; Almeida 1995). Kamp & Rohrer derive their use of the term explicitly from Reichenbach’s theory (Reichenbach, 1947), in which it is used in a somewhat broader sense, i.e. in Reichenbach’s theory reference time may refer to past, present, or future orientation moments.
has a transposed variant. The last section considers one of these transposed modes, the directing mode, in more detail, and presents my view on the use of the so-called historic or narrative present as the basic tense of most parts of the Aeneid.

2 Discourse Modes

In her book *Modes of Discourse* (2003), Smith provides tools to describe the different ways of presentation in written texts by distinguishing several discourse modes. The discourse mode Narrative, for instance, covers past events and situations, usually presented in chronological order. When engaging in Description, the narrator takes his time to give the (physical) characteristics of, for instance, a certain object or character in his story world. The reporting mode is similar to spoken communication, as a narrator who is reporting actually ‘stops’ being a narrator for a moment and talks about his present, future or past. In addition to these discourse modes, we may also discern the registering mode, which occurs less frequently and contains present tense forms registering what is going on at the moment in which the narrator writes or performs his story.3

The interpretation of tense forms is an important key to recognize each of these discourse modes, but often not the only one: their interpretations can be (partly) derived from linguistic elements in the context, or from the semantic content. The use of tenses in the several discourse modes can be neatly arranged in a Table.4

---

3 The other two discourse modes as presented in Smith (2003) are Information and Argument; cf. also Kroon’s contribution (this volume).
4 The *infinitivus historicus* is used in the Aeneid in the narrative mode and in the directing mode (Adema forthc.).