THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SPANISH IMPERFECTO IN FRENCH ADULT LEARNERS: ASSESSING THE ROLE OF ASPECTUAL AFFINITIES

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Research Project E102009-07450, Spanish Ministry of Education

General aims of the study

- Describing use and knowledge of the Spanish past tenses → French adults learning Spanish as a foreign language in different stages of their process.
  - How does language similarities affect the learning process?
  - Is language transfer the main force guiding the process?
  - What is the relationship between knowledge and production?
- We will concentrate on the development of IMP. Special attention paid to the relationship between tense, grammatical aspect and event types in learners and native speakers.

Basic assumptions on the semantics of tenses

- Distinction between conceptual and procedural meanings (Blakemore 1987 / Wilson & Sperber 1993).
- Tenses are procedural expressions that constrain the interpretation of the explications (Moeschler 1994).
- In utterances, tenses combine with different event types (with conceptual meaning).
- Conceptual meanings are flexible. The semantic content of conceptual expressions can be modified to ensure interpretability (aspeccuol coercio, De Swart 1998).
- Procedural meanings are rigid and robust, and they cannot be altered (Escandell-Vidal & Leonetti 2000).
- Tenses determine the mental representation of events and contribute decisively to establish the temporal reference of an utterance. Temporal as well as other discourse relations between events come as a side effect of tense meanings in some specific environments.

The meaning of IMP in Spanish and French

- PROCEDURAL MEANING → The hearer must represent an event of any type as unbounded and find a past temporal frame to establish the reference of the IMP.
- Direct consequences:
  - IMP naturally selects atelic events.
  - Telic events must adapt to the requisites of the tense to ensure interpretation.
  - As a result, telic events in IMP are related to special contextual effects (narrative use, prospective, non accomplished and quotative readings, etc.).
  - Interpreting telic events in the IMP requires a supplementary effort, for both L1 and L2 speakers (Piñango, Zurif & Jackendoff 1999; Piñango, Winnick, Ullah & Zurif 2006; Siabaleva & Montrul 2002, 2005).
- Clear aspeccuol correlations (grammatical aspect / event types) are found in the different readings of IMP.
- There is cross-linguistic variation in the availability of some readings of the IMP in specific structures (mainly in conditional clauses). They are due to the general state of the tense-aspect system in each language, not to the meaning of the IMP itself.

Basic assumptions on L2 use

- When producing and interpreting utterances, both native speakers and L2 learners try to maximize cognitive effects and reduce processing efforts (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995; Foster-Cohen 2000).
- The overall comprehension process in L2 learners works in exactly the same way as for native speakers. What may differ is the logical form generated and/or the cognitive context accessed (Foster-Cohen 2000).
- Interpreting and producing utterances in L2 imposes an extra burden on the processing system. Input and output simplification have been considered a way of trying to diminish the effort (Leveit 1989; Pienennann 1999, 2005; Ringbom 2007).

Some questions

- What is meant by simplification? How can the concept of simplification be operationalised?
- How can simplification be related to the learning of the tenses in general, and to the learning of the IMP in particular?
- In the case of Spanish and French, how does simplification relates to language transfer?
Hypothesis 1
• (1) Linguistic meaning is underspecified. Therefore, tenses need contextual enrichment during the interpretation process. This is a critical source of complexity in L2 tense-aspect system learning.
   - (1a) Some tenses need, as a rule, more contextual enrichment than others. As a result, they are acquired later. → IMP is non-autonomous. It needs more contextual enrichment than SP.
   - (1b) For each tense, some types of reading need more contextual enrichment than others. Those types of reading are acquired later. → Coerced readings of the IMP need more contextual enrichment than non-coerced readings. Coerced readings are acquired later.
   - (1c) The acquisition of a tense is a non-linear, discontinuous process. Frequently, the acquisition of pragmatically marked readings of a tense occurs later than the acquisition of (pragmatically unmarked readings of) a new tense.

Hypothesis 2
• (2) In closely related L2 learning, learners show an initial tendency to use and interpret L2 tenses as they would use and interpret the L1 tenses bearing morphologic and semantic similarities.
   → French speakers learning Spanish may transfer the difference between perfective and imperfective tenses from their L1.
   → French has also coerced readings of the IMP.
   → L1 transfer may be, to some extent, a facilitating device.

How does Hypothesis 2 interact with Hypothesis 1?

Empirical research
• Task 1. Oral narrative. Short film retold in first person (as a personal experience).
• Task 2. Written narrative. Personal experience (“Your best birthday party”).
• Task 3. Identifying and correcting tense mistakes in a short narrative text (personal experience).
• Task 4. Gap-filling (multiple choice answers) in a narrative text (personal experience).

Corpus and methodology
• Tasks 1, 2 and 3.
  - Experimental group: 33 monolingual French speakers (higher education, age range 20-70) learning Spanish in Paris (institutional setting) in 4 different levels (8-9 informants per level).
  - Control group: 9 monolingual Spanish speakers (higher education, age range 25-55) from Madrid.
  - Each informant performed tasks 1, 2 and 3 individually, on a single occasion.
• Task 4.
  - Experimental group: 88 monolingual French speakers (same profile as former tasks) in 4 different levels (17-25 per level).
  - Control group: 10 monolingual Spanish speakers (same profile as former tasks).
  - Informants performed the task during class-time.

Task 1: results
• Level A. Main tenses: PRES > PP (used as the PC in French).
  - IMP: 7 tokens, 2.94% → 85.71% st., *14.25% (1 token) achiev. Core readings only (property). Mainly in background.
• Level B. Main tenses: PRES > PI > IMP (used as PC).
  - IMP: 66 tokens, 23.57% → 65.15% st., 33.33% act., *1.51% achiev. (1 token).
  - Core readings only (property, progressive). Mainly in background.
• Level C. Main tenses: PRES > PI > IMP.
  - IMP: 64 tokens, 18.18% → 65.62% st., 23.43% act., 9.37% acc. (*4 out of 6 tokens), *1.56% achiev. (1 token).
  - Core readings only (property, progressive). Mainly in background.
• Level D. Main tenses: PI > IMP > PRES.
  - IMP: 100 tokens, 30.76% → 66.6% st., 28% act., 6% acc. (*2 out of 6 tokens), Core readings only (property, progressive).
• Control group. Main tenses: PI > IMP > PRES.
  - IMP: 179 tokens, 31.29% → 66.85% st., 29.03% act., 7.3% acc., 2.8% achiev. More varied readings, including non core readings (prospective, non accomplished). Mainly in background.

Task 2: results
• Level A. Main tenses: PRES > PP (used as the PC in French).
  - IMP: 12 tokens, 16% → 83.33% st., 16.66% act. Core readings only (property, habitual, continuous). Mainly in background.
• Level B. Main tenses: PI > IMP > PRES.
  - IMP: 19 tokens, 26.38% → 84.21% st., 5.26% acc. (1 token), 10.52% achiev. (2 tokens).
  - Core readings only (property, habitual, progressive). Mainly in background.
• Level C. Main tenses: PI > IMP > PRES.
  - IMP: 20 tokens, 30.76% → 65% st., 20% act., 10% acc. (1 token).
  - Core readings only (property, habitual, continuous, progressive). Mainly in background.
• Level D. Main tenses: PI > IMP > PRES.
  - IMP: 15 tokens, 20.27% → 53.33% st., 20% act. (8 tokens), 26.66% acc. (3 tokens).
  - Core readings only (property, habitual, continuous). Mainly in background.
• Control group. Main tenses: PI > PRES > IMP.
  - IMP: 17 tokens, 15.04% → 76.47% st., 11.76% act. (2 tokens), 11.76% acc (2 tokens).
  - Core readings only (property, habitual, progressive). Always in background.
Production tasks: main tendencies

- Very strong link IMP / discourse background in experimental and control group.
- Strong link atelicity (mainly states) / imperfectivity in levels A and B, compared to C, D and control group.
- Similar aspectual correlations in levels C, D and control group.
- In experimental group, few cases of overextension or confusion perfectionity / imperfectivity at all levels.
- Only core readings of IMP attested in experimental group. Some non core readings attested in control group (Task 1: prospective, non accomplished).
- Some variation in the types of readings of IMP, depending on the task topic (Task 1: telling a story / Task 2: describing habits).
- In the experimental group, similar developmental trends in both tasks (although they are found earlier in Task 2).
- Main drawback: limited reliability of Task 2, due to small amount of tokens and variation in text type (especially in higher levels and control group).

Task 3: trends regarding association grammatical aspect / event type

- Level A.
  - Reliance on close explicit cues (mainly adverbials and connectives).
  - Aspectual matching acts as a clue when no other explicit cue is available.
- Level B. Tendencies similar to Level A, but more accurate choices overall.
- Level C. More attention to overall meaning. Influence of close explicit cues and event type is only found when more than one possibility is available (item 5, item 11).
- Level D. Influence of close verbal cues and event type is not found in the tasks of the majority of informants.
- Learners from levels C and D tend to accept activities in perfective tenses, but they are more reluctant to accept states. The difference seems related to the difficulty of constructing a bounded representation of the event (unlike many states, the duration of activities tends to be pragmatically limited).
- Control group.
  - No special reliance on close verbal cues. More attention to the overall meaning.
  - When different answers are provided within the group for a single item, they correspond to genuine ambiguities in the utterances.
- Main drawback: Task 3 is too short and too general. A new task is needed.

Task 4: conflicts between grammatical aspect and event type

- Level A. Reliance on close explicit cues (adverbials and connectives) and on aspectual affinities.
- Level B. Learners are expanding and rearranging their knowledge. Results are less clear-cut than in Level A, although reliance on explicit cues and aspectual affinities is still prevailing.
- Level C. Increased capacity for attending to overall meaning relations. However, coerced predicates are still challenging if at least one of the following features is found:
  - Use of perfective tenses in utterances with focalised duration adverbials (items 8, 15, 21).
  - Risk of negative transfer (items 16, 21, 26).
  - The coerced predicate is a state (items 16, 20, 23).
- Level D. Effect of focalised duration adverbials (15, 21) and risk of negative transfer (21, 26) on rejection of coerced predicates is still found.
- Control group.
  - Coercion is accepted without hesitation.
  - Occasional reliance on close verbal cues.

Simplification and transfer in the use of IMP by French learners

- In different levels, simplification and transfer (interact) in different ways.

Simplification:
- When producing utterances, learners from levels A and B tend to associate IMP to atelic predicates; when interpreting utterances, they pay attention to close explicit cues, thus neglecting more complex relations.
- Learners from levels C and D are less affected by simplification, but revert to it in case of strong interpretive conflict.
- Transfer:
  - Learners from level A are aware of the contrast perfectivity / imperfectivity.
  - Learners from levels A and B make little use of telic predicates in IMP; however, they do not reject them in interpretation, if clear explicit cues are available.
  - In levels C and D, learners accept and use all predicate types in IMP. However, negative transfer is found (both in production and interpretation) when the use of IMP differs in French and Spanish.
- In levels A and B, simplification seems more active than transfer. In levels C and D, transfer seems more active than simplification.

Tasks 3 and 4: common trends

- Levels A and B.
  - Decisions are made on the basis of close explicit cues (adverbials and connectives).
  - Coerced predicates are generally challenging, since aspectual matching may act as a cue when no other explicit cue is available.
- Levels C and D.
  - Increasing attention to overall meaning and discourse relations (although progress from one stage to the next is non-linear).
  - When more than one answer is possible, learners tend to choose the answer that best matches close explicit cues.
  - Some particularly challenging features:
    - Coerced states.
    - Perfective tenses in utterances with focalised duration adverbials.
    - Utterances where negative transfer is possible.
- Control group.
  - Aspectual coercion is widely accepted.
  - (Usual) attention to overall meaning and discourse relations.

On hypothesis 1 and 2

- They are both confirmed, but they are not equally manifest at a time: in lower levels, the need for simplification (H1) often overruns transfer (H2).
- Transfer is not effortless, because it involves expressing L1 perceptions through the means of L2.
  - In lower levels, using L2 often requires blocking automatic reactions in L1 and consciously accessing to representations of L2. This is resource-consuming.
  - In higher levels, access to L2 is faster and partially automatic (Segalowitz 2004). This allows for L1 positive transfer.
- Interpreting and producing coerced utterances is specially costly:
  - Coerced predicates allow the expression of additional nuances in meaning. Thus, using coerced predicates involves forming complex representations and finding a way of communicating them in L2.
  - Interpreting coercion often requires taking into account different cues disseminated in the utterance. This goes against the general pattern found in lower level learners.
  - In the case of telic predicates, constructing an atelic representation overtly contradicts their primary meaning. Conversely, many states are only compatible with perfectivity in some specially rich contexts.
- The generalisations conveyed by H1 and H2 may be seen as two different ways of maximizing relevance in L2.
Comparing production and interpretation tasks

- Production and interpretation tasks do not provide the same type of information. However, they show coherent trends that may be complementary:
  - The way learners use tenses as a discursive device is only seen in production tasks. In interpretation tasks, the role of discourse structure is unclear.
  - In production tasks, learners only use forms that are contextually accessible for them. This is useful to investigate how knowledge is accessed. Still, absence of a form in production does not necessarily mean lack of knowledge.
  - Learners produce many idiosyncratic forms (especially, in oral tasks); in some cases, it is difficult to ascertain which tense was meant (mispronunciation, transitory difficulty in accessing knowledge, etc.).
  - In interpretation tasks, data on tense-aspect knowledge are less conditioned by the capacity of producing recognisable morphology.
  - Only interpretation tasks can effectively test specific hypothesis on learners’ representations of tense-aspect relations.
- In order to investigate the relationship between use and mental representations, the combination of production and interpretation tasks is required.