Verbal Morphology in Advanced Varieties of English L2: Aspect or Discourse Hypothesis?

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Research Questions
1. What is the behaviour of advanced and very advanced learners in English L2 with respect to the Congruence Principle (Andersen, 1993)? Is there a strict or lax pairing of lexical and grammatical aspect?
2. Given the nature of the task (i.e. picture book-based oral narratives), is the choice of the verbal inflection conditioned by the lexical class of the verb or is there some influence from the task?

Background
1. Comrie (1976): the distinction between Progressive and non-Progressive (Simple) forms is obligatory in English.
   (i) The Progressive is a subclass of the Imperfective.
   (ii) Non-Progressive (Simple) forms of non-stative verbs have a habitual reading.
2. Smith (1991) and Cowper (1992): English takes the perfective as the unmarked viewpoint and the English simple tenses have a perfective viewpoint.
   Cowper (1998): given the default perfective viewpoint of English and the Principle of Non-Simultaneity of Points, event verbs in the Simple Present are interpreted as states holding over an interval.

   The reportive use of the Simple Present + the ‘event’ use (Leech, 2004). It creates a sensation of “closeness to the event, or vividness” (Cowper, 1998:13) i.e. events are reported as they take place.

3. Robinson (1990), Andersen (1993), Andersen & Shirai (1994): The Aspect Hypothesis – the acquisition of tense-aspect morphology is influenced by the lexical category of the verb (i.e. past and perfective inflections + telic and punctual verbs; imperfective inflection + activities and states – cf. the Congruence Principle).
4. Bardovi-Harling (1998, 2000): the distribution of temporal-aspectual morphology in interlanguage is conditioned by the communicative task (i.e. text type and structure).

Methodology

Our analysis was carried out from elicited narratives (“frog stories”). Specifically, we video-recorded 12 French speakers of English (with a level equivalent to the Proficiency in English), and 12 French professors of English at French universities. The corpus of 12 English native speakers was courtesy of Prof. Dan Slobin.

We performed:
1. a type/token count of all lexical verbs for each of Vender’s aspectual categories in the present and in the past (simple and progressive).
2. a chi-square test to establish the relation between grammatical inflection and lexical class
3. a series of non-parametric tests for independent samples

Results
1. The Present (non-Progressive and Progressive) is the dominant narrative tense in the three groups.

2. There is a strong correlation between the distribution of the Simple (non-Progressive) and the Progressive forms and the lexical class of the verbs.

3. FRENGT produce significantly fewer tokens of activity verbs with the perfective inflection than ENG (sig. = .029). There is no significant difference between FRENGT and ENG with respect to this class of verbs (sig. = .713).

Conclusions

1. While all subjects strongly pair activity verbs with the imperfective inflection – ING, FRENGT and ENG also rely on the activity / perfective inflection pairing. This may indicate that advanced French learners of English abide by the Congruence Principle more strongly than very advanced learners and the native speakers.

2. Yet, why durative atelic verbs with a perfective inflection? This could be due to the communicative task (i.e. telling a story is a perfective context while the – ING form is more proper to a picture description mode (Berman & Slobin, 1994). Very advanced learners and native speakers convey the vividness of the events.

References


