

THE DEVELOPMENT OF
PAST TENSE MORPHOLOGY
IN L2 SPANISH

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The general objective of this study is the investigation of some of the cognitive processes underlying adult second language acquisition (SLA) through the analysis of the development of morphological markers of temporality in the acquisition of Spanish as a second language (L2) among native English speakers. In particular, I argue that the analysis of data on the development of verbal morphology provides empirical information to address two central questions in L2 acquisition: ultimate attainment in L2 development and the relative effect of instructed settings. In effect, paradigms of verbal morphology have become an obvious research target to uncover potential differences in the development of languages among children and adults, and to analyze the potential effect of instruction. In this respect, one of the objectives of L2 empirical research is to discover whether nonnative speakers ever achieve the same type and level of knowledge that native speakers possess: ultimate attainment (Coppiters 1987; Flynn & Manuel 1991; E. Klein 1995; Schwartz 1986; Towell & Hawkins 1994).¹ On the other hand, the effect of explicitly focusing the learner's attention on specific items of the L2 grammar has practical as well as theoretical significance (e.g., Bley-Vroman 1989; Birdsong 1992; Schmidt 1995).

The theoretical argument about the lack of ultimate attainment in the use of past tense verbal morphology is substantiated by both anecdotal and empirical evidence. First, anecdotal evidence and impressionistic accounts do not reveal a high level of congruity between native and nonnative speakers' use of morphological markers of past tense in the target language (e.g., Birdsong 1992; Coppiters 1987; Towell & Hawkins 1994). For instance, it is common to find native speakers of English who — in spite of being near-native speakers of

1. However, even if adult nonnative speakers exhibited similar linguistic judgments as native speakers in most types of controlled experimental settings (e.g., Flynn & Manuel 1991; White 1989), we cannot ascertain that both groups are accessing the same type of linguistic system (e.g., Paradis 1994; Towell & Hawkins 1994).

Spanish by many standards — claim that they “feel insecure” about the use of the above mentioned contrasts. In particular, Schmidt (1995) argues that grammatical features such as the subjunctive, *Tu-Vous* distinctions, and aspectual contrasts are all notorious problems for both tutored and untutored learners. Furthermore, and most important, the above mentioned type of impressionistic evidence is matched by the empirical analysis of the development of tense and aspect in L2 acquisition studies. For instance, Coppieters (1987: 567) analyzed the use of *Imparfait* versus *Passé Composé* in French (see Chapter 4) and concluded that

extracting the precise contribution of an *Imparfait* or *Passé Composé* to the meaning of a given utterance in a given context is a very difficult and complex endeavor. Typically, the context will OVER-determine the meaning of the tense; it will be unclear exactly what the tense expresses by itself.²

Along the same lines, and based on data from L2 Spanish, García and vanPutte (1988) claimed that nonnative speakers seem to rely on more local cues for the selection of aspectual markers of past tense in Spanish, whereas native speakers are more attentive to the overall context of the narrative. Finally, irrespective of theoretical orientation, most studies show that the development of verbal morphology is a prime candidate for non-target-like acquisition (e.g., Bley-Vroman 1989; Coppieters 1987; Flynn & Manuel 1991; Schmidt 1995; Schwartz 1993). For instance, Paradis (1994) states that the complexity of morphosyntactic rules such as the subjunctive or aspectual differences in Romance languages are affected by maturational constraints.

Another phenomenon which represents a good testing ground for understanding adult L2 acquisition is the development of morphological markers of temporality in two distinct learning settings: untutored versus tutored learning (the latter especially represented in classroom environments). Untutored learners may be defined as natural learners because language development occurs in a natural setting of communication in the target language (i.e., normal social interaction).³ On the other hand, there are two types of tutored learners: foreign

2. Not surprisingly, another grammatical item considered to be as difficult as the past tense aspectual distinction is the use of the Spanish subjunctive. Schmidt claims that the subjunctive qualifies among the “notoriously difficult areas” in L2 acquisition for both tutored and untutored learners (1995: 40).

3. The distinction may not be as clear-cut as one would wish it would be the case. For instance, the access to the L2 environment is determined primarily by the region or country where the learner lives. This method, however, may be inaccurate because, as is the case for many immigrant groups, access to the target language is relatively limited or simply non-existent (e.g., Schumann 1987).

language students (access to classroom instruction only) and second language students (access to both classroom and natural setting). For classroom learners in particular, language development occurs in an environment with access to different types of interactional settings and where there is no immediate need for the functional use of the L2. A review of the L2 acquisition literature shows that the use of morphological markers of past tense aspect among untutored learners is categorically different from classroom learners. In general, untutored learners do not rely on morphological endings to mark aspect, but they prefer to use pragmatic means such as calendric reference, interlocutor scaffolding, adverbial marking, etc. (e.g., Dietrich, Klein & Noyau 1995; Perdue & Klein 1992; Schumann 1987; Trévisé 1987). In contrast, classroom learners normally engage in a meticulous analysis of verbal endings and their associated nuances of aspectual, tense and mode meaning (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig 1992, 1994; Bergström 1995; Hasbún 1995; Kaplan 1987; Ramsay 1990; Salaberry 1998).⁴ In sum, the analysis of L2 development in classroom versus natural settings may provide information about the effect of differences in language input, formal and functional requirements, and interactional frameworks on the sequence and rate of acquisition of the target grammatical markers of temporality as well as their eventual ultimate attainment (e.g., Buczowska & Weist 1991).

Furthermore, from a practical point of view, understanding the stages of development of markers of temporality may inform instructional sequences. In effect, recent models of task-based instruction advocate the role of explicit pedagogical intervention to influence and speed up L2 development (e.g., DeKeyser 1998; Johnson 1996; Long & Robinson 1998; Loschky & Bley-Vroman 1993; Skehan 1998). For instance, Johnson claims that pedagogical intervention through the manipulation of task design factors such as task objectives and time constraints may help learners acquire various features of the target language. Similarly, Long and Robinson advocate that pedagogical intervention should be preceded by the learner's focus on the achievement of specific task objectives. In particular, to achieve the pedagogical objectives proposed by task-based methodologies with respect to inflectional morphology,

Furthermore, different degrees of literacy (as reflected in formal tutoring) also have an effect on the tutored-untutored contrast. For instance, immigrant workers — compared to university students — will not normally have access to formal education other than limited on-the-job exposure to the target language (see also Birdsong 1989 for differences in grammaticality judgments among literates and illiterates).

4. This is especially true of university-level instruction where verbal paradigms constitute the *sine qua non* of language learning.