



The acquisition of English tense and aspect by Spanish and Chinese Speakers

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Abstract

There are some hypotheses competing to provide explanatory accounts if functional categories (FC) such as Tense (T) and Aspect (Asp) are present at early stages of acquisition. These are: (1) The Minimal Trees Hypothesis that claims that early grammars lack FC (Vainikka & Young-Stolen 1994, 1996a); (2) the Underspecification of Asp Hypothesis that claims that while T is unimpaired in early grammars, Asp is underspecified (Gavruseva 2002, 2003 and 2004) and (3) the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis that claims that the L2 initial state is the L1 end-state, minus the phonetic realization of the L1. Thus learners' grammars develop in response to L2 input that they cannot parse using the L1 grammar; such 'restructuring' takes place under the constraints of Universal Grammar (Schwartz & Sprouse 1994).

We present part of a comparative Doctoral study of acquisition of T and Asp in English by L1 Spanish and L1 Chinese at three different proficiency levels. In this article the focus is specifically on the contrasts between progressive Asp versus present T. Data were elicited from 102 subjects using an *Acceptability Judgment Task*.

Results are consistent with the claim that T is present in early stage grammars but Asp remains persistently difficult at advanced level (Gavruseva 2002, 2003 and 2004) for the Chinese speakers, although not for the Spanish speakers. These results also suggest that adult L2 learners may not be able to fully establish a representation for Asp if it is not already projected in their L1 as in the Chinese language.

1. Literature review.

Recent Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research argues that learners start out with the L1 value parameter with FC at early stages of acquisition. Thus supporting the Full Transfer Full Access hypothesis (White 1985b, 1989; Schwartz 1998; Schwartz and Sprouse 1994, 1996; Slabakova, 1999; Gavruseva and Lardiere's 1996; Haznedar's, 2003). There are however some other studies showing that L2 learners can not show the representation of FC at early stages of acquisition (Vainikka & Young-Stolen 1994, 1996a).

The argument also expands on the side that at advanced levels L2 learners do not necessarily achieve near-native like competence presenting different

characteristics such as incomplete /divergent representations or fossilized steady states (Parodi, 2001b; Sorace, 1993; Lardiere 1998).

In this article we discuss how Mexican, Spanish and Chinese L2 learners of English behave at lower intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced levels in the acquisition of the functional categories of T and Asp. The contrasted phenomenon is shown below:

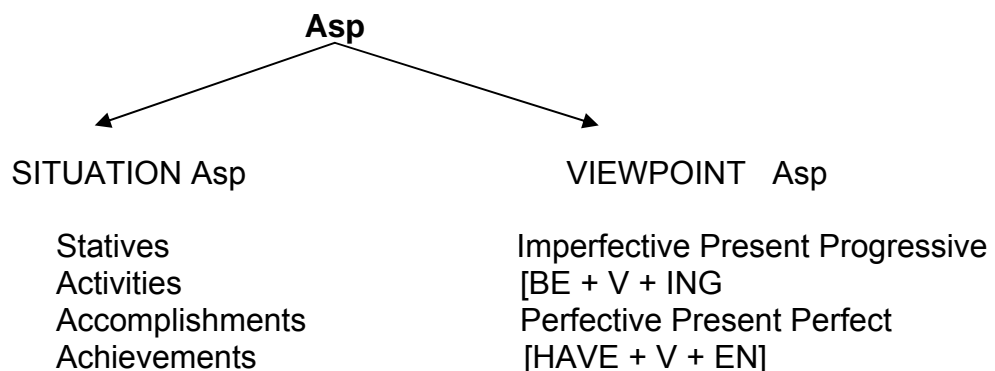
1. Present progressive **Asp** *be+ V+ ing* versus present **TV+-s**

The aim of this study was therefore, to suggest the cause of the subjects discriminations of T and Asp at these three stages of acquisition.

1.1 Parameterization of Asp and T between languages.

It has been proposed by Smith (1997) that Asp is a property of Universal Grammar (UG) hence common to human languages. Smith claims that Asp is of two types 1) 'situation' Asp¹ (verb + arguments + adverbials); and 2) 'viewpoint Asp', which is the modification of the event described in the predicate by VP, see Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Situation and viewpoint Asp in English



¹ Some researchers (Li 1990 and Behrens 1993 among others) have used the German term Aktionsart to refer to aspectual properties of verbs or verb phrases in contrast to aspect as it is defined by Comrie (1985).



Aspect allows the speaker to take different views of the event/situation (1-2), for instance focusing on the beginning, continuation and completion of the event/situation (Li and Shirai 2000).

2. My mother has made a cake (*Perfective aspect*)
3. My mother is making a cake. (*Imperfective aspect*)

On the other hand T is a grammatical category, oriented to speech time and it is indicated verbally (Smith 1997). It is defined as a grammatical expression of location in time Comrie (1985) and it appears that in all languages that have a T category, the notion of 'deictic centre'² ('moment of speech' or the 'here and now') is a crucial element of interpretation. However languages that do not have the grammatical category of T (Mandarin Chinese, Malay, Thai and classical Hebrew) the temporal location of time is expressed directly by adverbials and indirectly by the use of viewpoint aspect (Smith 1997). Although 'viewpoint' Asp and T are claimed to be fundamental properties of human languages, the languages under research (English, Spanish and Chinese) parameterize the way they realize them as follows:

The different readings
Their Morphology
Their syntax

1.2 Parameterization of readings in Asp and T.

Imperfective Asp is marked as progressive in the three languages; they coincide in two readings for imperfective such as: *repeated actions* and *progressive*. However they parameterize other readings; e.g. English extends its readings to *habitual*, *preliminary stages and future* and Chinese extends it to *durative*. These languages also parameterize T, English present T has the same readings as Spanish T with the

² The centre of a system which relates entities to a reference point (Comrie 1985)



exception of the progressive reading whereas the Chinese lacks of T as it is illustrated in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Parameterization of reading of present T

ENGLISH	SPANISH	CHINESE
Present	Present	[Ø]
Future	Future	[Ø]
Habitual states	Habitual states	[Ø]
	Progressive	[Ø]

1.3 Morphological parameterization of Asp and T.

The three languages also parameterize Asp and T morphological representations as Table 1.2 illustrates. Both English and Spanish attach the suffix to the verb however English is considered naked but Spanish is morphologically rich (Giorgi & Pianessi 1997). In contrast Chinese uses clitics to mark Asp, these clitics are not attached to the verb but are placed before and after the verb.

Table 1.2: Morphological parameterization of Asp

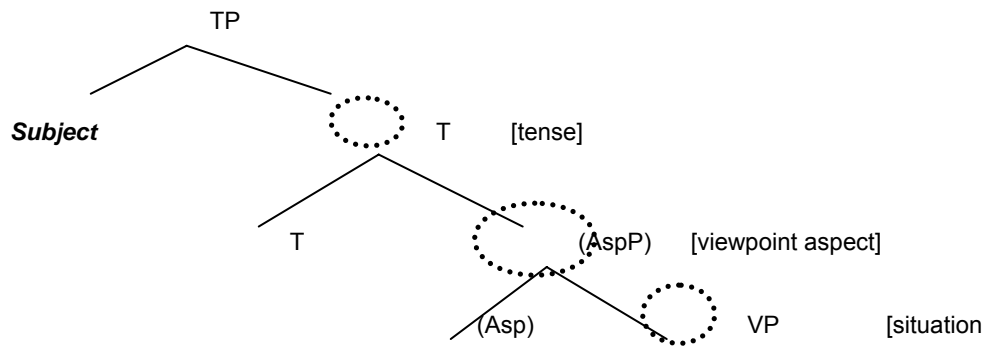
FORMS	ENGLISH	SPANISH	CHINESE
Asp			
Progressive	to be + <i>V-ing</i>	<i>ser + V-ando/iendo</i>	<i>V+-zhe/zai+V</i>
T			
Present	<i>V-s</i>	<i>V -o, es/as, e/a, emos/amos, en/an</i>	Ø

1.4 Syntactical parameterization of Asp and T.

These observations correlate in the generative tradition with three distinct components of syntax: 'situation' Asp is determined by the structure of the VP, 'viewpoint' Asp by a separate Aspectual projection (AspP) and T by a separate Tense projection (TP) (Giorgi and Pianesi 1997; Slabakova 2001). Both *have* and *be* auxiliaries are instances of Asp, a functional category that appears between T and VP

in the clause Adger (2003). Spanish and English project Asp and T similarly and outside the VP as it is shown in Figure 1.2.

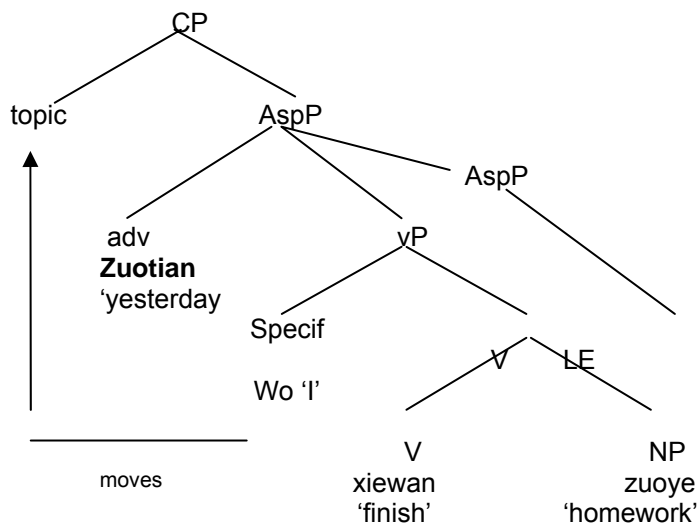
Figure 1.2: Projection of Tense and Aspect



aspect]

However Chinese, in contrast to both English and Spanish, does not project the FC of Asp outside the VP. Nevertheless it is realized inside the VP, moreover according to the literature (Li and Thompson, 1981; Smith, 1997; Klein et al, 2000; Ljungqvist, 2003) Chinese lacks a T category having a representation of Asp as it is shown in Figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3 Chinese clause structure





This does not mean that Chinese speakers cannot distinguish past from non-past events; simply that Chinese does not grammaticalise this distinction. T interpretations can be determined from contextual cues, such as the presence of a time adverbial (*zuotian*, 'yesterday'; *qunian*, 'last year'; *mingtian* 'tomorrow').

It is Important to have a review about the research towards the acquisition of these categories.

2. A review of acquisition of Asp and T.

Some researchers have investigated the acquisition of the FC of T and Asp within the Universal Grammar (UG) framework. We will consider Slabakova (1999, 2003), Haznedar's (2003); Gavrusseva & Lardiere; (1996); Lardiere (1998a, 1998b and 2000) and Grondin and White (1996) studies to illustrate.

In Slabakova's (1999) study she tested three different hypotheses: Partial Access to UG hypothesis, Full Access to UG hypothesis and Full Transfer/Full Access hypothesis. She concluded that learners transferred the L1 value of Asp parameter at the beginning and lower intermediate levels. Thus she provided support for the Full Transfer/Full Access hypothesis for SLA in the area of acquisition of the parameter of Asp³. Restructuring also took place in the L2 English acquisition of the Asp parameter by the Bulgarians.

Furthermore in Slabakova's (2003) study, she reported research about the FC of Asp. The results on the Eliciting Production Task were that 21 learners in the low intermediate group produced target-like inflectional morphology in the present simple but 11 learners did not. Furthermore in the progressive Asp morphology; more than 90% of all participants were target-like in the use of *-s*, *and- ing* endings. She assumed that all participants in the study had acquired the syntactic properties of the FC of Asp⁴.

³ According to Slabakova (2001) a difference between Slavic languages and English is the FC of Asp since it is parameterized.

⁴ Slabakova (2003:68) concludes with 4 main points in the Asp domain acquisition: 1. The formal features associated with the FC Asp are acquirable and 'unimpaired' in L2 acquisition. 2. There is no effect of instruction in the acquisition of semantic properties. 3. Knowledge of morphology briefly



There are also various studies within the generative approach (Lakshmanan and Selinker, 1994; Schwartz and Sprouse, 1994, 1996; Schwartz, 1998; Epstein *et al*, 1996; Grondin and White, 1996; Gavrusseva and Lardiere, 1996; White, 1996; Vainikka and Young-Scholten, 1996a; 1996b; Prévost, 1997; Haznedar, 1997, 2001 and 2003 among others) where the researchers are united in their claim that principles of UG constrain L2 development. However there exists a disagreement about the extent of the role of L1 grammar transfer in L2 development in early stages and whether UG parameters are set or reset.

In Haznedar's (2003) study she checked the status of FC in SLA by children. Her data did not support the claim for a successive developmental sequence of VP-TP-CP in L2 acquisition that the 'Minimal trees' hypothesis proposes. She investigated a four year old Turkish boy named Erdem. The development of CP in Erdem's English did not appear to be implicationaly dependent on the prior acquisition of T. These results support what Gavrusseva and Lardiere's study (1996) reported. They analysed data from an 8 year old Russian girl Dasha and argued that from the earliest stages the data provided evidence for the early emergence of CP. This girl produced CP-related elements before producing agreement, tense, auxiliaries and modals which according to the 'Minimal trees' hypothesis are necessary in order to acquire T. This means that the acquisition of CP did not depend on the acquisition of T. These results were also consistent with Lardiere's (1998a, 1998b and 2000) studies with respect to the discrepancy between the development of the syntactic representation of FC and inflectional morphology.

Lardiere (1998a, 1998b and 2000) collected data for 8 years, in Lardiere's (1998b) study she reported that a participant Patty's English was fossilized. She found that with regards to the verbal agreement Patty's production in morphology was 96% of obligatory contexts. Moreover thematic verbs were never raised in Patty's English and her production in marking verbs (past tense) was low at 34% but the pronoun case marker was perfect. These suggest that the feature

precedes knowledge of semantics in this aspectual domain, and 4. Aspectual pragmatics may be outside of the UG-regulated hypothesis space, therefore presenting challenge to learners.



specification for finiteness associated with the FC of T is indeed present in the L2 grammar and learners have knowledge that they do not show in production. In Lardiere's (2000) study she claims that all FC are available at early stages and that, syntactic development, the notion of the structure and the morphological form in L2 acquisition are largely independent.

Grondin and White (1996) tested children and found that the FC determiner (D) is present at early stages in L1 English children acquiring L2 French. This was a longitudinal study with production data gathered over a period of three years from two children referred to as Kenny and Greg. The results show that Null subjects only constitute 6% for Greg and 7% for Kenny. This could be because of the influence of the L1. Null subjects were rare from the beginning, however they showed a high incidence of subject clitics. Both children knew the agreement requirement so for this reason they must have had Infl. The evidence for T was the presence of clitic doubling with Greg. Post verbal subjects were rare in their data suggesting the influence of the L1. What this means is that the lack of post verbal subjects in their data suggests that both children raised subjects, which provided evidence for a T projection. Their data is consistent with the claims that for FC (Det and Infl) and their projections are available as part of the L2 initial state, as suggested by Schwartz and Sprouse (1994, 1996). Kenny's language at month two included determiners, inflections, case marking, clitics, and correct negative placement. As for Greg's early language interview at the fifth month this also showed similar evidence for DP and TP thus this study is also congruent with the previous ones.

Based on this review of the literature we formulated two research questions and three predictions:

Questions

- (1) Will their initial-state grammars be uninfluenced by the L1, and will input alone determine the properties of the mental grammars they construct for T and Asp in the target language?
- (2) Where the L1 does not project T/Asp features that are present in the L2, will learners be able to acquire these features with their appropriate interpretations?



Predictions

- A. If the MT hypothesis is correct the lower proficiency⁵ speakers should show evidence of marking viewpoint Asp (*be + ing*) more than T (*-s*) because the AspP should be established before the TP through incremental ‘structure building’.
- B. If FT/FA hypothesis is correct, it is expected that there will be clear differences in development determined by the nature of the properties of the L1.
- C. If the ‘Underspecification of Asp’ Hypothesis is correct, tense will be unimpaired but Asp will be underspecified.

3. Method

In this section we explain the methodology followed to carry out this study. We begin with the description of the participants, and then we will explain the instruments and the data collection procedures used.

3.1 Participants

Our experiment involved 102 participants and this sample was restricted to four different nationalities: Mexican (n= 27) 17 women and 10 men, Spanish, (n=48) 28 women and 20 men, Chinese (n= 22) 20 women and 2 men, and British (n=5) 2 women and 3 men. The average number of years of L2 instruction for the Mexican group was 9 years, for the Spanish group was 8 years and for the Chinese group was 8 years. None of these participants spoke a third language and all of them had a college degree. We took the decision to work with these groups because we found that there is not much work from a generative perspective contrasting Spanish and Chinese speakers acquiring T/Asp in English. Thus we wanted to extend the research within this domain.

⁵ Based upon Slabakova’s (1999; 2003) studies we consider in this study that the lower intermediate learners represent the initial state.



3.2 Instruments

In order to collect the data an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT) was used comparing imperfective progressive Asp versus present T. From a set of sentences which involved an introductory phrase and two semantically plausible sentence continuations (i.e. 3 and 4) subjects had to answer: *Inappropriate, Fairly impossible, I do not know, Appropriate and Fully appropriate*. Scoring took informants' ratings on a five-point Likert scale using one to five starting from inappropriate.

Viewpoint aspect

4. *We are on holiday*
a. we are staying STA [-DY,-T,-P]⁶ at the central hotel
b.*⁷we stay at the central hotel

Tense

5. *The group currently ...*
a.*is consisting of five people
b. consists STA [-DY,-T,-P] of five people

The AJT involved 100 sentences organized as follows: 20 appropriate sentences in imperfective progressive Asp, 20 inappropriate sentences in present T, 30 appropriate sentences in present T and 30 inappropriate sentences in imperfective progressive Asp.

3.3 Data analysis

Data from AJT were entered into SPSS statistical program. Appropriate and inappropriate continuations were the dependent variables, and were grouped into four situation aspect categories: Statives, Activities, Accomplishments and Achievements, crossed with two forms: imperfective progressive Asp/present T. Participants' responses of 1 and 2 (inappropriate and fairly impossible) were recoded as '0', and responses 4 and 5 (appropriate and fully appropriate) were recoded as '1'. We decided to conflate the score because most of the time the

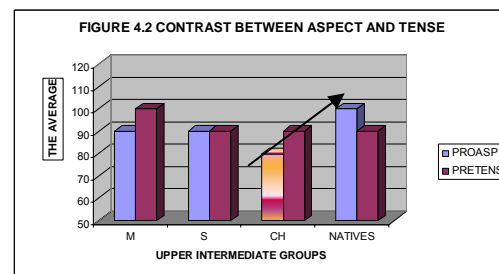
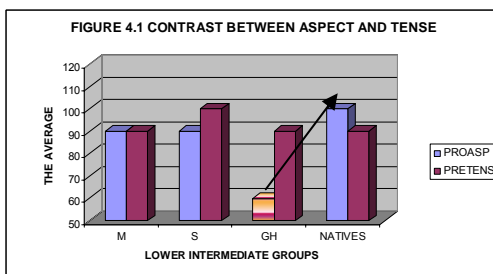
⁶ STA= STATIVES, DY= DYNAMIC, P= PUNCTUAL AND T=TELIC

⁷ * stands for inappropriate sentences

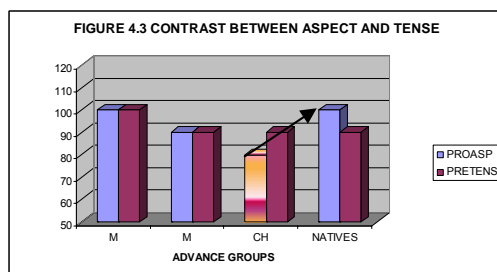
participants chose 1 or 5. Scores of 3 (I don't know) were excluded from the calculation since there were just a few. Inferential statistics appropriate to the data (either parametric or non-parametric tests) were used.

4. Results and discussion

The results show that with imperfective present progressive Asp the lower intermediate Spanish speaking groups perform differently from the lower intermediate Chinese group Figure 4.1 The lower intermediate Spanish speaking groups perform in a target-like way whereas the lower intermediate Chinese group is significantly different from the natives . In the upper intermediate levels the Spanish speakers behave steady whereas the Chinese speakers improve a little bit but are still different from the natives Figure 4.2.



It is said that in advanced levels learners should behave in a near native like way. In Figure 4.3 we observe that the both advanced Mexican and Spanish group reached target-like performance whereas the Chinese groups underspecified aspect.





These data confirms that at the initial-state grammars their L1 influences L2 acquisition of Asp. The Spanish speaking groups are interpreting raised main verbs as expressing progressive interpretation, which is impossible in English. With respect to the Chinese It is known that the progressive marker *-zai* does not co-occur with Statives (Li and Thompson 1981). We also know that the aspectual progressive marker *-zhe* can only be associated with Statives [+dynamic, +durative] (Smith 1997). Besides this marker can only be used in speech production. Furthermore Accomplishments are also incompatible with the imperfective morphemes (Smith 1997). Likewise the two progressive markers *-zai* and *-zhe* do not co-occur with Achievements. In Chinese an Achievement verb is not compatible with the progressive *-zai* because it does not have a process sub event, which is required for *-zai* (Li and Thompson 1981 and Smith 1997). These markers only accept Achievements with repeated actions. Thus we assume that the lower intermediate Chinese group is reflecting L1 interference in assigning meaning to the present progressive in English.

On the contrary the three groups perform in a native-like manner with present T. We assume that these results are because the Chinese language does not grammaticalise the FC of T whereas in the Spanish language the use of T is similar to that of English. As a result these groups do not show L1 interference with present T. With these data we also reject MT in our hypothesis A (Vainikka & Young-Stolen 1994, 1996a) since these speakers do not show evidence of marking Asp more than T, on the contrary they projected TP before AspP. However with development and input the speakers improved in the acquisition of Asp supporting FT/FA hypothesis (Schwartz & Sprouse 1994).in B. On the other hand as it is observed in figure 4.3 the Chinese advanced group underspecified Asp whereas the Spanish groups reached target-like performance. The category of T was unimpaired for the three groups(Gavruseva 2002,2003 and 2004).



5. Conclusions

In summary, this study makes the following contributions to the field of SLA research:

First, it adds further empirical support to the claim that the L1 is implicated in the development of tense T and Asp in SLA. Although in the literature the order of acquisition of T and Asp is controversial we claim that T develops earlier than viewpoint Asp.

Secondly the findings suggest that although Asp distinctions are claimed to be universal properties of the language faculty, differences in the realisation of these properties between L1s will have differential effects on SLA. Speaking Spanish or Chinese appears to influence the L2 acquisition of English in the sense that the Chinese groups underspecified Asp. It seems that they do not attain all the aspectual features of English.

Thirdly evidence from the present study broadly provides further support for a theory of L2 acquisition where there is Full Transfer from the L1, the broad availability of UG, but the possibility that an Aspectual FC may be persistently problematic if it is not projected in the speaker's L1.

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Biodata

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