

The L2 acquisition of the semantics and morphology of Aspect: a study of the acquisition of the Spanish imperfect-preterit contrast by native speakers of English

Grammatical Aspect conveys information about whether eventualities are finished or on-going (Comrie 1976). This distinction is grammaticalised in languages such as Spanish in the contrast preterit/imperfect. Languages like English show imperfectivity in periphrases (e.g. progressive *be+V-ing*). Examples (1) and (2), however, suggest that the imperfective/perfective contrast is operative in the semantics of English also in non-periphrastic forms. (1a) is interpreted as unbounded and (2a) as bounded, even though this distinction is not expressed by different morphology, unlike Spanish (1b), (2b). Thus, the difference between Spanish and English resides in the morphological means used to express semantic properties regarding the temporal status of the eventuality (Table 1).

This study investigates the acquisition of the perfective/imperfective contrast in Spanish by L1 English speakers. Research on the acquisition of the imperfect has been largely driven by the Aspect Hypothesis (AH) (Andersen 1984, Andersen & Shirai 1994) which states that the acquisition of aspect morphology is guided by lexical aspect properties of the verb (states, activities, accomplishments and achievements). Specifically, the AH predicts that imperfect forms should be first associated with states. However, the AH is oblivious to the different semantic interpretations (progressivity (3), habituality (4) and continuity (5)) associated with imperfect morphology in languages such as Spanish. Given the association between states and continuity, if learners are guided mainly by the lexical properties of the predicate (i.e. AH) we expect an early association of imperfect with the continuous meaning. If, however, the problem lies in the mapping of semantics onto morphology, those cases where ambiguous forms are used in the L1 should be problematic, as learners need to establish new meaning to form relationships.

To test these two hypotheses sixty L1 English learners of Spanish (20 beginners, 20 intermediate and 20 advanced) and 15 native speakers completed a sentence-context matching task testing their knowledge of the meanings associated with the Spanish preterit and imperfect. The results show that learners' overall acceptance rates of the imperfect increased with proficiency across all contexts and that the intermediate and advanced groups had higher scores for the habitual context than for the continuous and progressive contexts. No statistical differences in acceptance of the imperfect and rejection of the preterit were found according to type of predicates (stative or eventive), suggesting that the AH is not at the root of learners' choices. In contrast, the type of semantic interpretation does seem to affect their preferences since both the rates of correct acceptance of the imperfect and correct rejection of the preterit were significantly lower in continuous contexts for the intermediate and advanced groups than for the other two meanings. This behaviour is consistent with the hypothesis that problems with the remapping of semantic material onto new morphological forms would result in a late association of the imperfect with only the continuous meaning.

Our results show that not all the meanings associated with the imperfect are acquired simultaneously (i.e. the imperfect is initially associated with habituality and later on with continuity) and that English learners of Spanish need to establish a new association between the continuous interpretation (which is realised in their L1 with the preterit) and imperfect morphology in the L2 which is still not target-like at advanced stages; however, we claim that even in intermediate stages the acquisition of grammatical Aspect is not constrained by an early association with event types, suggesting that learners do not treat imperfect morphology as a marker of aspectual lexical class, but as proper grammatical aspect.

(1) a. John was ill when Marta visited him *Unbounded*→ event 1 can continue
event 1 *event 2* after event 2 is finished

b. John estaba enfermo cuando Marta lo visitó
 John be-past-**impf**-3ps ill when Marta visited him

(2) a. John was ill the whole winter of 2000 *Bounded*→ event cannot continue
in time indefinitely

b. John estuvo enfermo todo el invierno del 2000
 John be-past-**pret**-3ps

	English Morphology	Spanish Morphology
Preterite (bounded)	Simple past	Preterit
Imperfect (unbounded)		
Continuous	Simple past	Imperfect
Habitual	Progressive/habitual (<i>was+ing; used to +V</i>)	Imperfect
Progressive	Progressive/habitual (<i>was+ing; used to +V</i>)	Imperfect

Table 1. Aspectual distinctions in English and Spanish

(3) Marta iba al colegio cuando me la encontré PROGRESSIVE
 Marta go-past-**impf**-3ps to school when I ran into her
 ‘Marta was going to school when I ran into her’

(4) Marta iba al colegio en coche HABITUAL
 Marta go-past-**impf**-3ps to school by car
 ‘Marta used to go to school by car’

(5) Marta estaba enferma CONTINUOUS
 Marta be-past-**impf**-3ps ill
 ‘Marta was ill’