Low Applicatives in the Interlanguage of L2 Learners of Spanish

This paper deals with the L2 acquisition of different types of Spanish clitic “se” by English learners of Spanish on the assumption that they have to learn a new functional category corresponding to a low applicative head not present in their L1 language. In this respect, we would like to provide evidence as to the question of whether new functional categories or rather new configurations involving functional projections can be acquired in the process of L2 Acquisition. We present a new experiment based on an online multiple-choice-question questionnaire. In order to look for evidence of age factors, we tested different groups of adult learners at different stages of their L2 acquisition. The subjects of our study are English learners studying Spanish as Second Language.

English does not have any morphological element similar to Spanish “se” but does have low applicatives in the so-called double object construction as in the cases of ditransitive verbs as examples in (1) (cf. Pylkännen 2008). However, the low applicative head found in English has a more restricted semantic interpretation than the one found in Spanish. In fact, Spanish low applicatives can be interpreted as having a Low-APPL-TO relation (recipient applicative) in cases such as non-anticausative intransitive verbs, as in (2), and consumption verbs, as in (3) (cf. Teomiro 2013 and Teomiro & Romero 2012, respectively).

(1) a. John gave Mary a book.
   b. John gave her a book.

(2) a. Juan se cayó.
    Juan CL3RD fell.
    “Juan fell.”
   b. Pedro se murió.
    Pedro CL3RD died.
    “Pedro died.”

(3) a. María se comió la pizza.
    María CL3RD ate the pizza.
    “María ate up the pizza.”
   b. Petra se bebió dos cervezas.
    Petra CL3RD drank two biers.
    “Petra drank two biers.”

The same low applicative configuration appears with transitive verbs (Cuervo, 2003) where the clitic “se” denotes an inalienable possession as indicated by the examples (4a-b). Yet, the corresponding applicative head in English can only be interpreted as a recipient one. This accounts for the contrasting fact that applicatives (and so dative pronouns) can only co-occur with transitive verbs implying an inalienable possession in Spanish but not in English (4a.b) vs. (5a.b):

(4) a. Juan se lava las manos.
    Juan CL3RD washes the hands.
    “Juan washes his hands.”
   b. María y Ana se peinan el pelo.
    María and Ana CL3RD comb the hair.
    “María and Anna comb their hair.”
According to our results these learners in intermediate and advanced stages show to have different results with respect to the acquisition of the type of “se” that according to our analysis corresponds to a different functional category. In other words, our results come to confirm a twofold analysis of Applicatives in Spanish but not in English. On the assumption that only relevant functional categories are activated in the grammar of each language (White, 2005), English learners need to learn a new configuration and this requires extra time. Our data then shows evidence in favour of the main hypothesis of Full Access to UG according to which L2 learners can acquire a new functional category over time (cf. Schwartz and Sprouse, 1996; Epstein et al, 1996; Flynn, 1996; Flynn and Martohardjono, 1994). In particular, the difficulty that intermediate learners have with respect to “se” with non-anticausative intransitives (2), consumption verbs (3), and transitives denoting an inalienable possession (4a)-(5a) that require the presence of a different syntactic configuration is gradually absent in more advanced learners in our study.

References