

Language distance and phenomena complexity: influencing factors for the reassembly process? Evidence from Spanish as L2 among learners of different L1 backgrounds

One of the major questions within the field of L2 acquisition concerns the possibility of ultimate attainment of the target system, which led to several competing approaches. Contrary to those approaches that focus on the general (un)availability of features (see e.g. Tsimpli 2003), the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere 2009, Hwang & Lardiere 2013) states a full acquisition of the target system to be generally possible in spite of difficulties during the process of feature reorganization. In the beginning phase, the learner transfers the whole L1 feature configuration, and then continuously reassembles the form-to-meaning mapping.

Within this framework, we further hypothesize that the combination of a typological distance and a complexity of the linguistic phenomenon to be acquired may hinder learners to yield the complete feature reassembly. To this end, we compare L1 English and German learners of Spanish as L2. On the one hand, we investigate the contrast between Preterit and Imperfect (see 1 & 2) which involves the distinction of grammatical aspect (Comrie 1976, Zagona 2007). On the other hand, we examine gender assignment to nominal phrases (see 3 & 4).

Both phenomena involve grammatical features that differ from the L1s involved in the study. The English verb system involves a basic aspectual contrast found in the progressive form (Salaberry & Ayoun 2005, see 5), while German does not mark grammatical aspect at all (Heinold 2015, see 6 & 7). These differences have been reported to cause severe acquisition difficulties (Comajoan 2014). Different from the Spanish two-gender system, German has a three-gender system (see 8-10) (Eichler et al. 2012). By contrast, in English the distinction of three gender classes is only retained in 3rd person singular pronouns (Corbett 1991).

Besides these differences, there are some similarities: in the case of grammatical gender, German is nearer to Spanish, whereas in the case of verbal aspect, it is English. Our study analyzes the L2 knowledge and potential L1 effects. Our goal is to show that a feature reassembly is an arduous process not guaranteed to be completed. We present data from three groups: (1) 15 Anglophone learners from the USA, (2) 15 German learners (both groups on advanced level according to a DELE proficiency test, mean age = 20,5) and (3) native speakers of Spanish (N=15). The data were collected in Spain, the US and Germany by means of oral interviews and a written production task, containing a Grammatical Judgment Task (24 items for each phenomenon plus distracters) and a Completion Text (20 items).

Based on Chi-Square tests and ANOVA, our findings show that L2 learners struggle with gender agreement. German learners of Spanish outperform the English in the written tasks and transfer is visible in the type of learning strategies. Both learner groups rely on gender regularities. When looking at inaccurate items, significant differences between the two learner groups are visible. German learners of Spanish produce gender violations due to transfer from German to Spanish in the gender of nouns ending in -e (see 11). By contrast, English learners produce gender violations due to overgeneralization of gender regularities in non-canonical nouns. The oral data shows that learners have severe problems with gender agreement, causing significant differences from the native control group.

The aspect data shows that even the written tasks manifest severe difficulties, causing significant differences between the learners and the native group. Although no group achieves native accuracy, learning strategies are crucially different. Anglophone learners base their selections on lexical aspect, which does not correspond to the target system (see 12). Germans, however, do not take any aspectual features into account, neither lexical nor grammatical ones, and rely merely on rule-based learning (focusing adverbials, see 13). In this sense, English L1 speakers are nearer to the target system.

As hypothesized, the L1-L2 distance and the complexity of the phenomena themselves must be considered when claiming a successful reassembly. A combination of both factors – great typological distance and high complexity of the grammatical domains in the target system – complicates the process to such an extent that the achievement of the target configuration may turn out to be highly exceptional, as it is the case for German learners in the area of aspect.

Examples

- (1) *Juana vio a varias personas.* (**perfective context, Preterit**)
'Juana saw various persons'
- (2) *Juana veía a varias personas.* (**imperfective context, Imperfect**)
'Juana was seeing various persons'
- (3) *La (Sg., Fem.) mesa (Sg., Fem.)* – the table
- (4) *El (Sg.,Mask.) libro (Sg.,Mask.)* – the book
- (5) *She was studying (progressive) when the telephone rang (simple past).*
- (6) *Du hast geschlafen, als ich nach Hause gekommen bin.*
'You were asleep when I came home' (**imperfective and perfective context, both in present perfect, same meaning as in 7**)
- (7) *Du schliefst, als ich nach Hause kam.*
'You were asleep when I came home' (**imperfective and perfective context, both in simple past, same meaning as in 6**)
- (8) *Die (Sg., Fem.) Banane (Sg., Fem.)* – the banana
- (9) *Der (Sg.,Mask.) Tisch (Sg., Mask.)* – the table
- (10) *Das (Sg.,Neut.) Buch (Sg., Neut.)* – the book
- (11) **La (Sg.,Mask.) puente - die (Sg., Fem.) Brücke* – the bridge
- (12) *Cruzaba la calle cuando la atropellaron.*
'She was crossing the street when she was hit by a car'. (*cruzaba* = telic,
imperfective context)
- (13) *Ayer aún sabía la respuesta, pero ya no me acuerdo.*
'Yesterday I still knew the answer, but now I don't remember it' (*ayer* = adverbial
suggesting completion,
imperfective context)

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