Title: “Assessing L2 competence of tense-aspect knowledge in Spanish and Portuguese: Data analysis and theoretical interpretations”

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Abstract

In Spanish, both single and iterated telic events can be conveyed with the use of perfective morphology (1a), whereas habituality is typically expressed with the use of imperfective morphology (1b). On the other hand, the concept of iterativity is expressed with the Preterite (1c).

1a. Ayer el tren del mediodía llegó (PRET) tarde.
   *Yesterday the 12 o’clock train arrived late.*

1b. Cuando era niño, el tren del mediodía llegaba (IMP) tarde.
   *When I was a child, the 12 o’clock train arrived late.*

1c. Durante muchos meses el tren del mediodía llegó (PRET) tarde.
   *For months the 12 o’clock train arrived late.*

English native speakers are very familiar with the contrast of single events versus habitual events (1a versus 1b), both through high frequency representations of such contrast in most L2 (second language) data sets, along with explicit instruction on such contrast. Less well known among these learners is the contrast between single and iterated events (1a versus 1c). In this respect, previous studies (e.g., Pérez-Leroux et al., 2007; Salaberry, forthcoming; Slabakova & Montrul, 2007) consistently show that whereas both English native speakers learning Spanish as well as Spanish native speakers consistently accept the use of the Preterite with sentences depicting a single event (1a), only L2 learners tend to reject the use of the Preterite depicting an iterated telic event (1c). The theoretical interpretation of this finding is, however, controversial depending on the theoretical persuasion of the researcher analyzing the same data.

The analysis of the previous data sets is further complicated by the fact that at least two recent studies using L2 Portuguese data show that non-native speakers are indeed capable of correctly assigning the use of the perfective form to iterated events (i.e., Iverson & Rothman, 2008; Rothman & Iverson, 2008). These studies bring up the distinct possibility that the L2 makes a difference in the acquisition of the concept of iterativity among English speakers. It is also possible that the type of data analysis and theoretical underpinnings have an effect on the outcome of the assessment as well.

In this presentation, I will review the relevance of two overarching theoretical models that have been proposed to account for the success or failure of L2 learners to distinguish the marking of iterativity from habituality (cf., generative and cognitive perspectives). I will also analyze the significance of the research design and type of data analysis of various studies on the assessment of the L2 data (cf., comparison of Spanish and Portuguese data sets). Finally, I will evaluate the intertwined effect of theoretical and methodological factors for the analysis of L2 data focusing on the analysis of the knowledge of tense-aspect in particular. The conclusion will
lead us to substantiate the concept of default markers of past tense (Salaberry, 2000; 2008) as an indicator of incomplete knowledge of tense-aspect contrasts (i.e., directly accessed through general problem solving capacities).

References