Syntax-before-Morphology in L2 Acquisition: Semantic Evidence from Aspect in L2 Portuguese

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The majority of available studies on the acquisition of [±perfective] aspect in adult second language acquisition (L2A) have been undertaken from non-generative paradigmatic approaches to SLA such as cognitive-perceptual, lexical/semantic and narrative perspectives (see Montrul & Salaberry 2003 for a review). Moreover, in light of the questions they seek to investigate, most non-generative studies (especially within L2 Romance) have primarily focused on the emergence and use of Preterit/Imperfect morphology in performance (oral and written). However, assuming a syntax-before-morphology position (e.g. Lardiere 1998, 2000; Prévost & White 2000; Schwartz 2003), which anticipates possible performance-level differences between L2 and native [±perfective] aspect morphological use (notwithstanding a competence that is fundamentally the same), it is not clear that examining L2 morphological use alone achieves the intended goal of gauging underlying grammatical competence. As a result, available generative studies have tested for L2 knowledge of associated poverty-of-the-stimulus (POS) semantic entailments to determine underlying morphosyntactic competence in this domain (e.g., Goodin-Mayeda & Rothman to appear; Montrul & Slabakova 2003; Slabakova & Montrul 2003). This study continues this line of investigation, considering new data of the L2 acquisition of [±perfective] aspect in L2 Portuguese.

Following Giorgi & Pianesi (1997) and others we assume that [±perfective] aspect—as seen in the Preterit/Imperfect contrast in Romance languages—derives from the specification of relevant morphosyntactic features associated with the functional category higher AspP, and therefore falls under the phenomena accounted for by UG. Furthermore, stemming from the dichotomy of [±perfective] aspect, sentences with the Preterit and Imperfect are subject to related POS semantic entailments that restrict the range of interpretations. In light of this, we test for [±perfective] aspect competence in advanced English learners of adult L2 Portuguese via their knowledge of a particular POS semantic entailment, namely the associated [±accidental] interpretation restriction with adverbial quantifiers.

As Lenci & Bertinetto (2000) have demonstrated for Italian, and Menéndez-Benito (2001, 2002) for Spanish, both the Preterit and Imperfect contrast is not neutralized in adverbially quantified sentences in Romance languages (as predicted by Bonomi’s (1997) theory) since these forms are not interchangeable in context with, for example, expectative phrases such as in (1) and (2).1 That is, in sentences with adverbial quantification like (1) and (2) the perfective necessarily denotes an accidental generalization while the imperfective denotes non-accidental generalizations. Additionally, only perfective sentences with adverbial quantifiers block the kind-referring reading of the subject DP,

1 In fact, she demonstrates that the Preterit and Imperfect are also not interchangeable with respect to generic adverbials (normalmente, a menudo) and durational phrases (durante cuatro semanas) as well.
which is otherwise available as a choice with definite DPs along with a group-denoting reading, as in (3 and 4). Portuguese definite DPs can have either a kind-reading or a group-denoting reading. For example, ‘As mulheres são inteligentes’, can be understood as women are intelligent in general (the kind-reading) or a contextually determined group of individual women are intelligent. Whereas imperfective adverbially quantified sentences, as in (3), retain both types of subject DP reading, only a group-denoting reading is available for similar perfective sentences, as in (4). As a result, sentence (3) can indicate the actions of a contextually determined group of specific students or students in general whereas sentences like (4) can only refer to a particular group of students. Furthermore, only the Imperfect can support the truth of counterfactuals, therefore, (4) cannot support either (5) or (6). However, the possible group-denoting interpretation of (3) supports the counterfactual in (5) whereas the available alternative kind-reading supports the counterfactual in (6).

Employing a context-rich matching judgement task (scale -2 to 2), the empirical study tests 20 advanced English learners of L2 Portuguese as to their knowledge of the aboved discussed semantic restrictions, as in (1-6). The results demonstrate L2 interpretations in line with both the native speaker control (n=19) and the discussion above. It is argued that these data strongly support full access to UG in adulthood (inclusive of access to crucial syntactic features not available from the L1, in this case the [-perfective] feature). We discuss these results in terms of what they bring to bear on various L2A theories.

Test sentences:

(1) Sempre que nós falamos da morte da Maria, eu comencei a chorar.
   always that we speak-1PPL-PAST-PFV about the death of Mary, pro start-1PSG-PAST-PFV to cry.
   ‘Whenever we spoke of Mary’s death, I ended up crying.’

(2) Sempre que nós falavamos da morte da Maria, eu començava a chorar.
   always that we speak-1PPL-PAST-IMP about the death of Mary, pro start-1PSG-PAST-IMP to cry.
   ‘Every time we spoke of Mary’s death, I would cry.’

(3) Sempre que os romanos precisavam mais, conquistavam novas terras.
   always that the Romans need-3PPL-PAST-IMP more, pro conquer-3PPL-PAST-IMP new lands.
   ‘Whenever the Romans would need something, they would conquer new lands.’

(4) Sempre que os romanos precisaram mais, conquistaram novas terras.
   always that the Romans need-3PPL-PAST-PFV more, pro conquer-3PPL-PAST-PFV new lands.
   ‘Whenever the Romans needed something, they wound up conquering new lands.’

(5) Se os romanos tivessem precisado mais terra durante aquele tempo, se teriam apoderado dela.
   ‘If the Romans had needed more land during that time, they would have seized it’

(6) Se você fosse romano e tivesse precisado mais terra, você se teria apoderado dela.
   ‘If you were Roman and you had needed more land, you would have seized it.’
References


