

# Failed Features versus Full Transfer Full Access in the Acquisition of a Third Language: Evidence from Tense and Agreement\*

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the verbal functional domain in third language acquisition (henceforth L3A). In the author's earlier work on L3A of the nominal functional domain (Leung 2001, 2002a), it was found that the formal feature [ $\pm$ definite] related to the Determiner Phrase (DP) "failed" and there was evidence of transfer from the L2 English steady state to the L3 French initial state. In order to examine the potential parallelisms between the two functional domains in L3A, this paper set out to investigate the formal features associated with the verbal functional category of T(ense), namely, finiteness ([ $\pm$ finitive]), agreement and [ $\pm$ past] in Hong Kong Cantonese-English bilinguals' French interlanguage.

## 2. The L2 initial state and the acquisition of functional categories

In this paper, we adopt the Failed Features Hypothesis (FFH) (Hawkins 1998, 2000; Hawkins & Chan 1997; Smith & Tsimpli 1995), which is a modern version of no parameter resetting. The FFH assumes full transfer of L1 in the L2 initial state. It predicts the non-availability in L2A of parameterized properties not instantiated in L1. In other words, the FFH rejects the possibility of UG restructuring in L2 development. Specifically, according to Hawkins (1998, 2000), a subset of uninterpretable features will "fail" (i.e. be non-acquirable and thus absent) permanently in L2A.

## 3. The problem of the initial state in L3A/LnA

As far as L3A or non-native language acquisition (LnA) is concerned, our principal hypothesis is also full transfer, but we argue that the source is not necessarily from L1. We posit that the Ln initial state is the steady state of a previously acquired (inter)language which is typologically closest to Ln. It is contended in the psycholinguistic/descriptive L3 literature that linguistic typology is a crucial factor in determining the exact source of cross-linguistic influence in L3A (see Cenoz 2000; Hendriks & Prodeau 2000; amongst many others). In addition, Kellerman (1979, 1983) postulated that psychotypology (i.e. perceived typology between the source language and the target language by the language learner) is another relevant factor. We therefore incorporate this idea of (psycho)typology in our hypothesis as regards what constitutes the L3 initial state. See the findings of Lozano (2002) which are not inconsistent with our claim; see also Vinnitskaya, Flynn & Foley (2002/this volume) who have reached a similar conclusion.

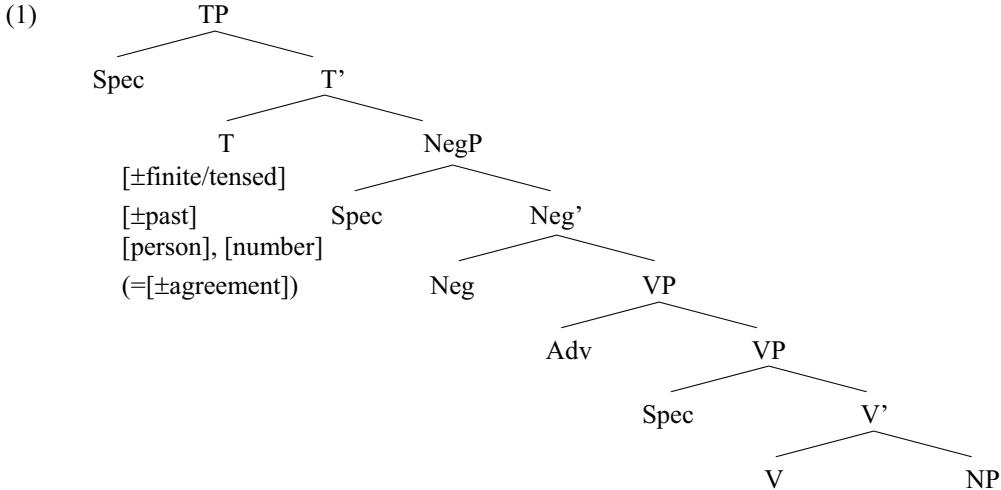
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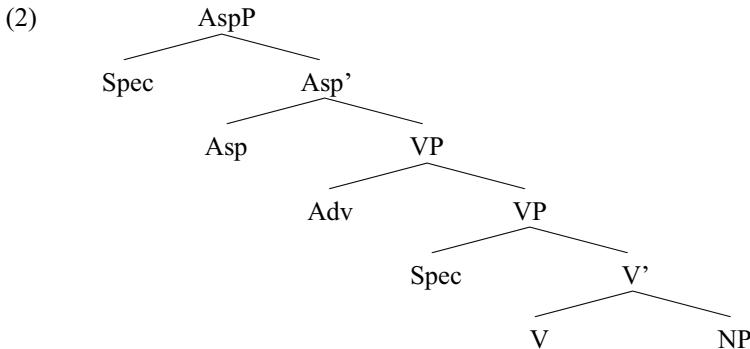
## 4. Theoretical background: Status of Infl in French, English and Chinese

### 4.1 Tense and agreement in English and French

We follow Chomsky (1995 Ch.4) in assuming the functional category of T to be present in English and French; Agr as a category no longer exists. The verbal features associated with T include [ $\pm$ finite] (or [ $\pm$ tensed]), agreement or *phi*-features of person and number, as well as [ $\pm$ past]. The structure in (1) below is assumed for English and French in this paper:



### 4.2 Finiteness in Chinese



According to Gu (1995), Cheng (1997), amongst others, Chinese sentences are Asp(ect)Ps. It is generally assumed that Chinese languages lack agreement (e.g. Huang 1982). However, it is much more controversial as to whether there is a finite/non-finite distinction in the languages. In this paper, we subscribe to the view of Hu, Pan & Xu (2001) who contend that there is no (syntactic) finite/non-finite distinction in Chinese. Hu *et al.* point out that on the surface/morphological level, Chinese does not fulfil Stassen (1997)'s "PAST CONDITION" which states that tensed languages must have a verb form for exclusive past time reference, hence tense does not constitute a grammaticalized category in Chinese. On the more abstract/syntactic level, Hu *et al.* argue that a finite/non-finite distinction in Chinese is only apparent. The ungrammaticality of examples cited by those who contend for such a distinction (e.g. Huang 1984, Li 1990) is attributable to semantic incompatibility and/or controversial judgements and incorrect intuitions. An example given in Hu *et al.* is as follows: Huang (1984) claimed that non-finite clauses in Chinese cannot take modals such as *hui* ("will") which expresses futurity, as in (3) below:

- (3) \*wo **zhunbei** [PRO mingtian **hui** lai]  
 I prepare PRO tomorrow will come  
 \*‘‘I plan to possibly come tomorrow’’

Hu *et al.*, however, argue that *hui* also denotes possibility and uncertainty. The ungrammaticality of the sentence in (3) is in fact due to semantic incompatibility between *hui* (denoting possibility) and *zhunbei* (‘‘plan’’), but not the finite/non-finite status of the clause. Based on similar examples, Hu *et al.* conclude that a finite/non-finite distinction in Chinese is only apparent, at least as far as on the morphological and syntactic levels.

In this paper, we follow Hu *et al.* and assume that a syntactic finite/non-finite distinction does not exist in Chinese languages, including both Cantonese and Mandarin. Hence, [ $\pm$ finite] (or [ $\pm$ tensed]) which is posited as the categorial feature required for the projection of T is absent. TP is thus not present in Chinese, and the associated present/past tense feature [ $\pm$ past] is also taken to be absent. These facts bear important implications for the L2/L3 acquisition of English and French by Chinese speakers. The hypotheses and predictions regarding our acquisition case are presented below.

## 5. Hypotheses and predictions

There are three sets of predictions based on FFH that concern the initial, transitional and steady states in our L3 case:

### (I) L3 initial state (L3 French beginners)

We hypothesize that the L3 French initial state is the L2 English steady state based on (psycho)typology. FFH predicts that [ $\pm$ finite], agreement and [ $\pm$ past] features will ‘‘fail’’ in subjects’ L2 English and these ‘‘failures’’ will transfer to their L3 French. In other words, the same features are predicted to be absent in both the English and French interlanguage of our subjects.

### (II) L3 development/transitional state (L3 French intermediate learners)

FFH predicts no improvement in intermediate group’s performance in the experimental tasks concerned, i.e. [ $\pm$ finite], agreement and [ $\pm$ past] features will continue to be absent in subjects’ L3 French interlanguage.

### (III) Towards the L3 steady state (L3 French advanced learners)

FFH predicts that the ‘‘failed’’ features transferred from L2 English will ‘‘fail’’ permanently in L3A. Therefore, [ $\pm$ finite], agreement and [ $\pm$ past] features will be permanently absent from advanced group’s L3 French interlanguage.

## 6. Methodology

### 6.1 Participants

Three experimental groups and two control groups took part in the present study. The experimental groups consist of 84 Cantonese-English bilingual undergraduate students of French at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) who were all advanced L2 English speakers (average Michigan score is 71.65/80). Based on the Laval Placement Test scores, we divided these subjects into three groups: there were 44 L3 French beginners (average Laval score is 19.23/54), 30 L3 French intermediate learners (average Laval score is 30.87/54) and 10 L3 French advanced learners (average Laval score is 43.50/54). We also had 30 native speakers of French and 31 native speakers of English serving as controls.

### 6.2 Experimental tasks

There were three tasks in the experiment which are relevant to this paper: an elicited written production (composition) task on [ $\pm$ past], another elicited written production (sentence completion) task adapted from Herschensohn (1998) on finiteness/agreement as well as a grammaticality preference task (the format of which was based on White 1991a, 1991b) on finiteness, agreement and

[±past]. Each experimental subject completed both the French and English versions of the tasks, with a 7- to 10-day lag. Details of each experimental task are as follows:

### 6.2.1 *Elicited written production task I: Composition on [±past]*

The first elicited written production task was a composition task on past tense marking. Subjects were asked to write a 100- to 150-word short prose on a topic, an example of which is “Describe your secondary school life”. This task aimed to see whether subjects have acquired the feature [±past] (i.e. correct past tense morphology).

### 6.2.2 *Elicited written production task II: Sentence completion on finiteness/agreement*

The second elicited written production task was a sentence completion task adapted from Herschensohn (1998), which was originally on L2 French adverb placement. We modified the task and designed the test items in such a way that it would enable us to look at agreement and finiteness as well. (We will not deal with adverb placement in this paper. See Leung (2002b) for details). There were a total of 12 test items in each language, with different combinations of person/number. An example in the French task is shown in (4) below:

- (4) Aller / au / cinéma  
 Marc et Pete: 3 fois / mois
- Marc et Pete.....cinéma.

### 6.2.3 *Grammaticality preference task on finiteness, agreement and [±past]*

The last task to be reported in this paper is a grammaticality preference task the format of which was adopted from White (1991a, 1991b). The task involves pairs of sentences; subjects were to decide on a response amongst five options given below the pair (i.e. “only a is correct”, “only b is correct”, “both correct”, “both wrong”, “not sure”). There were 12 items on finiteness, 12 on (wrong) agreement and 12 on [±past] in each language. Examples (one token per type) are given below:

- (4) Finiteness  
 (a) Je rencontre beaucoup de monde chaque jour.  
 (b) Je rencontrant beaucoup de monde chaque jour.
- (5) Agreement  
 (a) J'aimons écouter de la musique classique.  
 (b) J'aime écouter de la musique classique.
- (6) [±past]  
 (a) Sophie a beaucoup parlé à la reunion hier soir.  
 (b) Sophie parle beaucoup à la reunion hier soir.

## 7. Results

### 7.1 Elicited written production task I: Composition on [ $\pm$ past]

	No. of obligatory Contexts	Past tense marking (%)	Errors (%)
<b>L3 Beg's Fr (n=44)</b>	543	436 (80.29%)	107 (19.71%)
<b>L3 Beg's Eng</b>	642	489 (76.17%)	153 (23.83%)
<b>L3 Inter's Fr (n=30)</b>	440	363 (82.50%)	77 (17.50%)
<b>L3 Inter's Eng</b>	460	364 (79.13%)	96 (20.87%)
<b>L3 Adv's Fr (n=10)</b>	132	107 (81.06%)	25 (18.94%)
<b>L3 Adv's Eng</b>	146	114 (78.08%)	32 (21.92%)

Table 1

Accuracy and error rates in elicited written production I on [ $\pm$ past]

Table 1 above indicates that subjects have consistently high accuracy rates with respect to past tense marking in both English and French and across proficiency levels. No significant difference was found in the error rates in the French task amongst all three experimental groups, in the English task amongst all three experimental groups, as well as between each group's French and English.

### 7.2 Elicited written production task II (adapted from Herschensohn 1998): Sentence completion on finiteness and agreement

	Finiteness	Agreement
<b>L3 Beg's French (n=44)</b>	97.59%	96.90%
<b>L3 Beg's English</b>	92.99%	92.99%
<b>L3 Inter's French (n=30)</b>	98.33%	99.10%
<b>L3 Inter's English</b>	93.60%	93.60%
<b>L3 Adv's French (n=10)</b>	100%	100%
<b>L3 Adv's English</b>	97.50%	97.50%
<b>French NS control (n=30)</b>	100%	100%
<b>English NS control (n=31)</b>	99.45%	99.45%

Table 2

Mean percentages of accurate responses in elicited written production II on finiteness and agreement

As we can observe from Table 2 above, subjects' performance on finiteness/agreement in both French and English was native-like. Single-factor ANOVAs showed a marginally significant difference amongst experimental groups and controls with respect to finiteness ( $F(3,110)=2.7913$ ,  $p=.0496$ ) and agreement ( $F(3,110)=2.6998$ ,  $p=.0477$ ) in French and finiteness/agreement in English ( $F(3,111)=3.3207$ ,  $p=.0425$ ). In addition, paired two-sample  $t$ -tests showed a marginally significant difference between performance in English and French of L3 French beginners (finiteness:  $t(43)=-2.0015$ ,  $p=.0398$ ; agreement:  $t(43)=-2.1324$ ,  $p=.0461$ ) and L3 French intermediate (finiteness:  $t(29)=-2.3231$ ,  $p=.0439$ ; agreement:  $t(29)=-2.2659$ ,  $p=.0483$ ) and no significant difference between L3 French advanced group's English and French with respect to both finiteness and agreement.

7.3 Preference task on finiteness, agreement and [ $\pm$ past]Finiteness

	Finiteness (French)				Finiteness (English)		
	<i>Infinit.</i>	<i>Pres part.</i>	<i>Past part.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Pres part.</i>	<i>Past part.</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<b>L3 Beg</b>	93.75%	79.50%	75.93%	83.06%	98.41%	97.73%	98.07%
<b>L3 Inter</b>	96.00%	81.83%	72.10%	83.31%	99.43%	99.43%	99.43%
<b>L3 Adv</b>	100%	100%	82.50%	94.17%	100%	100%	100%
<b>Fr NS</b>	100%	100%	97.50%	99.17%	-	-	-
<b>Eng NS</b>	-	-	-	-	98.39%	97.84%	98.12%

Table 3

Mean percentages of correct responses in preference task on finiteness

Turning to results of the preference task, Table 3 indicates that subjects' improvement was a bit slower as far as finiteness is concerned. No significant difference was found between L3 beginners and L3 intermediate in the French task. The L3 advanced group made considerable progress and there was no significant difference between their performance and that of the controls in the French task. Regarding the English task, all experimental groups performed native-like and no significant difference was found when compared with controls. Moreover, paired two-sample *t*-tests found a significant difference between L3 beginners' English and French ( $t(43)=6.9427$ ,  $p<.0001$ ) and L3 intermediate's English and French ( $t(29)=8.2372$ ,  $p<.0001$ ). No significant difference was found between L3 advanced group's English and French.

Agreement

	Agreement (French)			Agreement (English)				
	<i>1sg. vs. 1pl.</i>	<i>1pl. vs. 3pl.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>No -s on 3sg.</i>	<i>Add -s on 3pl.</i>	<i>Add -s on 1sg.</i>	<i>Add -s on 1pl.</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<b>L3 Beg</b>	94.48%	93.75%	94.14%	96.20%	90.91%	99.25%	99.25%	96.40%
<b>L3 Inter</b>	97.77%	97.67%	97.72%	100%	93.33%	100%	98.90%	98.06%
<b>L3 Adv</b>	98.30%	95.00%	96.65%	100%	100%	96.70%	100%	99.18%
<b>Fr NS</b>	98.23%	99.43%	98.83%	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Eng NS</b>	-	-	-	99.19%	97.58%	99.19%	100%	98.99%

Table 4

Mean percentages of correct responses in preference task on agreement

With respect to agreement in the preference task, one may note from Table 4 that performance was perfect for all the three experimental groups in both languages. No significant difference was found in accuracy rates in the French task amongst all three groups, in the English task amongst all three groups, nor between each group's French and English.

[±past]

	French [±past]			English [±past]		
	[+past]	[-past]	Mean	[+past]	[-past]	Mean
<b>L3 Beg</b>	74.91%	82.55%	78.73%	88.03%	78.35%	83.19%
<b>L3 Inter</b>	78.90%	87.00%	82.95%	88.63%	76.67%	82.65%
<b>L3 Adv</b>	98.30%	93.00%	95.65%	86.62%	82.98%	84.80%
<b>Fr NS</b>	93.11%	95.57%	94.34%	-	-	-
<b>Eng NS</b>	-	-	-	95.25%	96.77%	96.01%

Table 5

Mean percentages of correct responses in preference task on [±past]

Finally, we turn to [±past]. Table 5 shows gradual improvement across proficiency levels in the French preference task and the L3 advanced learners did not differ significantly from French controls. We also observe that English [-past] appears to be more problematic for learners; in addition, a significant difference found amongst all learner groups and controls in the English task with respect to overall performance ( $F(3,111)=6.6965, p<.0005$ ). Furthermore, very intriguingly, the advanced group performed nearly perfectly in the French task but significantly less so in the English task ( $t(9)=3.8574, p<.005$ ), which suggests that a better performance was attained in the L3 steady state than the L2 steady state.

## 8. Hypotheses and predictions revisited

In this section, we evaluate the hypotheses and predictions set out in Section 5 in the light of the results presented right above:

### (I) L3 initial state (L3 French beginners)

Our findings largely support full transfer from L2 to L3, but contrary to the FFH, transfer did not involve “failures” – [±finite], agreement and [±past] were shown to be present in both the L2 English steady state and the L3 French initial state. The data also provide strong evidence against L1 Chinese transfer.

### (II) L3 development/transitional state (L3 French intermediate learners)

The results suggest that the features [±finite], agreement and [±past] are present continually in L3 intermediate subjects’ French interlanguage grammar. Significant improvement in performance in experimental tasks was observed.

### (III) Towards the L3 steady state (L3 French advanced learners)

L3 advanced subjects’ performance in the experimental tasks was native-like. This provide strong support that the features [±finite], agreement and [±past] are present in the L3 French steady state.

In sum, we have demonstrated that the L3 French initial state is the L2 English steady state. However, none of the features concerned appear to have “failed” in the L2 nor the L3 steady state. These results are inconsistent with the predictions of FFH.

## 9. Further discussion and conclusion

An important question that is relevant to the discussion of Failed Features versus Full Transfer Full Access is the following: to what extent can one equate surface morphology with abstract underlying syntactic representation? There are two sides to the question. First, does defective morphology imply defective syntax? According to Lardiere (1998a, 1998b), Prévost & White (2000) and those in the so-called “full access” or “no impairment” camp, the answer is negative. According to these researchers, defective morphology suggests only a “mapping” problem rather than “failure” of functional module or absence of features concerned. What is more interesting and more pertinent to this paper is, however, the other side of the question: does perfect morphology entail perfect syntax? According to Wong & Hawkins (2000), the answer is not necessarily. Wong & Hawkins found that their L1 Malay L2 English subjects have acquired the surface morphology related to *wh*-argument questions of the target language but not the abstract syntactic properties. The stance we take in this paper is that correct morphology implicates presence of relevant morpho-syntactic features. The French data on L3 beginners suggest that correct morphology is not simply a result of learning. We also have other syntactic evidence available such as nominative Case and adverb placement (see Leung 2002b) which point towards full access. To conclude this paper, our findings do not seem to support FFH, and it appears that Full Transfer Full Access (Schwartz & Sprouse 1994, 1996) would offer a more viable account for our L3 case at hand.

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