

The Light Flashed until Dawn: **The L2 Acquisition of the Semantic Mappings of Spanish Tenses and Problems of S-Selection and Compositionality**

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1. Introduction

1.1 Goals

Tense and aspect can be described as a domain in second language acquisition that is difficult, and prone to fossilization (Coppieters 1987, Montrul and Slabakova 2001). Most previous studies have concentrated on morpheme acquisition and on the role of lexical classes in the acquisition of aspect morphemes, supporting the observation that certain morphemes emerge earlier in combination with certain lexical classes. More recent debate both in the L1 and L2 fields has shifted from speculation on the nature of the morphology-lexical class association, to attempts to understand the challenge of mapping forms to meanings in the aspectual domain (see Bardovi-Harlig 1999, Slabakova 2001). Our study sets out to revisit issues regarding the nature of non-native grammars by investigating second language acquisition of preterite/imperfect contrast in Spanish, using both a translation task and a grammaticality judgment task. The specific goals of this paper are (i) to speculate about the learnability conditions for the acquisition of the semantics of T/A markers; (ii) to reexamine criteria for acquisition of the aspectual contrast preterite/imperfect in Spanish, and (iii) to assess L2 learners performance with preterite and imperfect in aspectual coercion contexts such as those described by Jackendoff (1997, 51):

- (1) The light flashed until dawn.

These cases are interesting in the context of Spanish L2 acquisition in instructed settings, because they behave contrary to the pedagogical description of the preterite/imperfect usage, which states that imperfect is used for repeated past events. In fact, the preterite is used in aspectual coercion contexts, yielding iterative (as opposed to habitual) interpretations, as shown in (2):

- (2) La luz del faro se encendió hasta el amanecer. (preterite, iterative)
'The light of the lighthouse flashed until dawn.'

Pilot work had shown this context to result in high error rates for L2 speakers (Pérez-Leroux 2000).

2. Background

2.1 Do aspectual distinctions present a special acquisition challenge?

Coppieters' (1987) landmark study of near-natives identified clear quantitative differences in the intuitions of native and L2 speakers in regards to the imparfait/passé composé distinction in French. When presented with items such as (2) and (3), L2 participants in his study failed to approach native speakers' behaviors.

- (3) Est-ce que tu {as su/ savais} conduire dans la neige?
'Did you manage to drive in the snow?'/ 'Did you know how to drive in the snow?'

- (4) Comment ça a été?/Comment ça étais?
‘How did it go?/How was it?’

L2 learners’ performance with aspectual meanings did not match that of native speakers. It seemed, however, that lack of attainment was not uniform across the range of properties examined:

“The data indicate that the differences between NS’s and NNS’s involve not so much the formal areas of grammar traditionally covered under the term UG (i.e., constraints on grammatical form, logical form, complex syntax, etc.) as those typically addressed by linguists interested in ‘functional’ or ‘cognitive’ aspects of the grammar [...]” (Coppiters 1987, 565)

Birdsong (1992) challenged Coppiters’s conclusion about asymmetries in attainment with findings that point to no differences across domains. Furthermore, he objected to a description of phenomena such as the *ce/il* alternation from a functionalist perspective.¹ Crucially for us, we wish to correct the methodological heterogeneity in Coppiters’s study, as his study did not include tests of performance on aspect. The question is not so much whether UG informs a particular aspect of language—we simply assume that it is—but whether all components of grammar behave equally in developmental data. Moving away from broad epistemological categorizations of grammatical domains, the questions of learnability, attainability and relative difficulty in second language acquisition should be investigated independently for each area of the grammar.

Recent work by Slabakova and Montrul (2001) directly examined the question of attainment in aspectual meanings, this time using Spanish as the L2. These authors identify a subset of very advanced speakers (near natives) that perform indistinguishably from native speakers on a sentence conjunction task that asks participants to judge the semantic well-formedness of the conjuncts. The structures contained one clause with the target tense and a conjunct establishing the perfectivity/imperfectivity of the first clause, and learners were asked to rate how logical the combinations were.

In related work, Montrul and Slabakova (2002) establish that learners can acquire the semantic difference [\pm perfective] encoded overtly in Spanish through the preterite/imperfect morphology after full mastery of morphological recognition. They establish a specific point of difficulty in the L2 grammar of aspect, in the imperfect with achievement predicates. Their advanced speakers performed like natives in all conditions except for that particular condition, in which they performed near chance but which were fully accepted by the native controls. Following Giorgi and Pianesi (1997), they suggest that imperfect is odd used with achievement predicates, because achievements have an inherent endpoint and are incompatible with the unbounded nature of the imperfect. Context can save the structure, however, by shifting focus from the result to the process leading to the result:

- (5) Juan alcanzaba la cima cuando una ráfaga de viento se lo impidió
‘Juan reached the top when a strong wind prevented him from reaching it’

They suggest that for achievement predicates in the imperfect tense, the advanced learners behaved as predicted by Giorgi and Pianesi’s theoretical account in tending to reject this particular combination of lexical class and tense, whereas the natives speakers had no difficulty accepting it (Montrul and Slabakova 2002, 139). They propose that L2 subjects fail to coerce the appropriate process reading, perhaps for principled reasons:

“Even though English speakers coerce in English, and Spanish speakers do the same in Spanish, coercion might be peripheral to UG competence, and thus harder to acquire. That is, non-native speakers have the morphosyntactic and interpretive properties (features) of AspP fully intact, but, unlike native speakers, they might not have the pragmatic ability to coerce so as to avoid a conflict between the semantic features of aspectual lexical class (telic) and those of the aspectual tense (unbounded).” (Montrul and Slabakova 2002, 140)

¹ Incidentally, Reed (1999) shows that the correct description of *ce/il* subject alternation also involves aspectual selection. This would group it again with the problem of attainment in the aspectual domain.

In sum, they conclude that the feature [\pm perfective] is ‘acquirable’ and ‘unimpaired’ in L2, but that learners may have special difficulty acquiring the capacity to coerce meanings in a L2 context. One may speculate, given the automatic nature of semantic coercion, that coercion cases should, in principle, not be a problem for learners, since all languages have these ‘free aspectual transitions’ as part of type shifting operations that make interpretation possible by reconciling the interpretation of the different parts of an utterance. In this study we explore different alternatives presented by semantic as opposed to morphosyntactic theories of aspectual meanings.

2.2 Theoretical views on the learnability of tense and aspect

The morphosyntactic approach to variation in the aspectual domain is epitomized by Giorgi and Pianesi’s (1997) landmark proposal, which links the morphological structure of languages to particular tense interpretations, in an effort to explain why some languages need auxiliaries to express meanings that are represented by synthetic forms in other languages. In their view, a clause has two tense heads that instantiate the relation between Speech event (T_1) and Reference event (T_2). Languages vary in whether Tense and Agreement heads appear fused or split, and their morphosyntactic configuration is associated with certain interpretations. In English, where tense and agreement forms are in complementary distribution, the two heads are analyzed as fused. In Romance, these features split into separate heads, making it possible for one to appear without the other. This difference is illustrated in the templates below. In Giorgi and Pianesi’s analysis, English fused Tense/Agr forces the English present perfect, the Speech Time, to be identical to the Reference Time, while in Romance T_1 is included in T_2 . So, English exhibits restrictions on punctual predicates in the present perfect that are absent in Romance:

- (6) a. horne-a-ba-mos horne-a- Ø-mos
 verb-TV-IMP-1PL verb-TV-Ø-1PL
 b. She baked She bake-s
 bake-PAST Verb-3SG
- (7) a. $\sqrt{\text{Juan ha salido a las cuatro.}}$
 b. *John has left at four.

Under this approach, the semantics of a tense in a particular language is directly correlated with presence/absence of overt morphology and on the structural conflation or separation of the tense and agreement heads. If these morphosyntactic reflexes are responsible for the interpretative patterns, then acquisition of morphosyntax should be a sufficient trigger for acquisition of the semantics.

An alternative to this model lies in an account of aspect developed by de Swart (1998) and Schmitt (2001) in which it is proposed that functional (tense and aspect) heads in a language select for particular types of eventuality description. The basic assumption of this model is that aspect is compositional and layered:

- (8) [Tense [Aspect* [Eventuality Description]]]

The lower layer of the aspectual interpretation of a clause consists of an eventuality description, interpreted from the composition of verb type plus arguments as well as pseudo-arguments, as they shape and delimit the basic event type. The upper layer of this structure involves elements traditionally understood as aspectual operators. Finally, Tense introduces existential closure over the set of eventualities, and maps the event onto the time axis. In this system, eventualities are ontologically typed as homogeneous (state and processes) or heterogeneous (achievements and accomplishments), by analogy to the mass/count distinction in the nominal domain. Comparable events can be presented at different levels of granularity depending on what operators and tense heads are layered over the initial eventuality structure:

- (9) run/run a mile/is running a mile/has been running a mile, etc.

Differences across languages depend on the availability of various aspectual markers. These markers can be either aspectual operators (perfects, progressives, duration adverbials etc.), which output a given eventuality description, or aspectual tenses, which do not transform the semantic type of the eventuality but which can impose selectional restrictions upon the type of eventuality description it selects. To illustrate how the two systems work, consider the present tense in English and Romance. In the Giorgi and Pianesi approach, the different English/Romance morphosyntax of tense determines the restricted interpretations in English. Italian and Spanish allow both a property and a ‘real present’ sense of the present, whereas in English the simple present only has a property, habitual interpretation, as shown in (10). However, Schmitt (2001) points out that this approach predicts that languages with comparable morphosyntax should belong to the same semantic type. Yet, Portuguese, with a verbal paradigm nearly identical to Spanish, patterns semantically not with Italian and Spanish but with English.

- | | | | | |
|---------|---------------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| (10) a. | Maria come manzanas | (Spanish) | √‘right now’, | √‘apple eater’ |
| b. | Maria eats apples | (English) | *‘right now’ | √‘apple eater’ |
| (11) | A Maria come maçãs | (Portuguese) | *‘right now’ | √‘apple eater’ |
| | ‘Maria eats apples’ | | | |

Following de Swart (1998), Schmitt argues that the locus of crosslinguistic difference lies in the selectional properties of the tense heads. When there is a mismatch between the selectional requirements of the tense head, and the semantic type of its VP, coercion operators are introduced to shift the semantic type of the VP and guarantee interpretability. Two types of coercion operators can repair a selectional mismatch (de Swart 1998): (i) Operators that take a bounded eventuality and coerce a homogeneous eventuality, by either turning it into a process and ignoring its culmination, or creating a state by forcing an iterative or habitual reading; and (ii) Operators that make a homogeneous predicate non-homogeneous by adding a boundary (either at beginning or at the end). Schmitt assumes that the present tense selects for homogeneous predicates in Italian and Spanish and specifically for states in English and Portuguese. With bounded predicates, coercion is needed in all languages to resolve the discrepancy between the selectional features of the present tense and the bounded predicate. In Spanish and Italian, the coercion operator is PROCESS, but in English and Portuguese it is HAB(itual) or ITER(ation). The result is the semantic contrast observed. In Spanish, a bounded predicate is coerced into a process and the utterance allows a real present interpretation, as shown by the temporal adverb *en este momento* (‘at this moment’). The comparable English example (12b) is semantically anomalous.

- | | |
|---------|--|
| (12) a. | Pedro come una manzana (en este momento) |
| b. | Peter eats an apple (#right now) |

Radically different learnability models can be built from these two different views of tense and aspect. In the morphosyntactic approach, semantic mastery is related to morphological development. In the selectional approach, the learner’s task is primarily lexical: what are the s-selectional restrictions which operators apply in a given language, etc. One can easily conceive an acquisition process where the learner bootstraps the type of tense head to be acquired (see Gillette et al 1999) from the subcategorization frames, and from adverbs. However, note that the learner’s task is obscured by the fact that coercion itself may mask some of the relevant facts in the input.

2.3 Aspectual coercion

The term ‘compositionality’ refers to the notion that the meaning of utterances is built up from the composition of the meanings of their parts, as well as the semantic contribution of the syntactic operation that merges the various parts. Turning to (1) and (2) above, we see that it constitutes a problem of compositionality because neither the basic sentence nor the duration adverbial ‘contain’ in any way, the sense of iterativity. In (13) the event is interpreted as a unique, punctual event. The duration phrase *until dawn* does not by itself introduce iterativity when combined with homogeneous

predicates. Somehow, the interaction of the temporal structure of (13) plus the interpretation of *until dawn*, introduces a sense equivalent to *repeatedly*.

- (13) The light flashed (unique/punctual)
 (14) Bill slept until dawn (state)
 (15) The light flashed until dawn (iterative punctual events)

The time adverbial forces a homogeneous reading of the basic eventuality, and a coercion operator intervenes to render the predicate homogeneous. Of the two operators that map eventualities onto states, HAB(itual) and ITER(ative), ITER is the one involved.

- (16) [until dawn [ITER [The light flashed]]] → outputs the state of unbounded ‘lightflashing’

Turning now to Romance, the preterite selects eventive predicates, and the imperfect selects for homogeneous predicates. Choice of preterite or imperfect happens at the more basic level of composition of the predicate and its arguments. The simple sentence *la luz se encendió* ‘the light flashed’ goes in the preterite, which selects a quantized predicate, which like its English counterpart, yields a unique event interpretation. The duration adverbial, then, forces, as in English, the introduction of the relevant coercion operator. In the iterative with the imperfect, the operator is introduced at a lower level. The tense itself selects a homogenous predicate, and context determines whether the operator selected is process or habitual. An operator is always needed when imperfect is combined with bounded predicates.

3. Methods

3.1 The task of L2 learners and some predictions for error patterns

In an instructed setting, a considerable amount of instructional effort is devoted to aid in mastery of the morphology of the two Spanish past tenses, represented in (17):

(17) Spanish Past tenses

Imperfect	Preterite
<i>hablábamos</i>	<i>hablé hablaste</i>
<i>comía</i>	<i>comiste</i>

Concurrently with morphological practice, pedagogical textbooks introduce meanings utilizing primarily a list approach to teaching the meanings, more often centering presentation around the concept of perfectivity, or the opposition description/versus narration (Jarvis, Lebreo and Mena-Ayllón 1999). The habitual contexts in the imperfect are a standard part of classroom practice, and the explicit description offered in textbooks states that the imperfect is to be used with past repeated events, whereas single, completed events are best expressed by the preterite. As shown, this simplified description correctly characterizes the habitual reading of the imperfect, but makes the wrong prediction for the iterative sense of the preterite discussed above.

To evaluate the developmental process, and assess learners’ performance in coercion contexts, we designed elicitation contexts to isolate learner’s performance on the different semantic mappings of the Spanish tenses. Various error patterns can emerge, depending on whether coercion itself is difficult, whether learners simply follow patterns that reflect effect of instruction or, finally, whether there are broader indications of a divergent representation of the aspectual features in the L2.

The first set of structures focused on the basic features of the perfective/imperfective contrast with Spanish past tenses. Learners who were aware of the basic contrast would know that telic predicates in the preterite entail completion, and would be able to detect the semantic anomaly that arises when such a predicate is presented in combination with a sentence expressing non-completion. In parallel, learners would be able to understand the entailment that a stative predicate in the preterite indicates a change of state—particularly in the absence of a rationale for sporadic changes of state—and detect the anomaly resulting from the use of the preterite. The last three contexts focus on more complex cases: the habitual interpretations of the imperfect in generic contexts, and the iterative interpretation arising

from coercion (in (22)), or directly from iteration adverbials (in (23)). These contexts are presented in a) - e) below. The # symbol indicates semantic anomaly, and is used throughout this paper rather than the more familiar symbol for ungrammaticality, since none of these sentences is actually ill-formed.

- a) *Telic predicate plus conjunct expressing non-completion*
 (18) a. Hice la tarea pero no me dejaron terminarla. (# PRET)
 b. Hacía la tarea pero no me dejaron terminarla. (√ IMP)
 ‘I did/was doing the homework but they didn’t let me complete it.’
- b) *State predicates plus a conjunct stating persistence*
 (19) a. Las manzanas estaban sobre la mesa y todavía están. (√ IMP)
 b. Las manzanas estuvieron sobre la mesa y todavía están. (# PRET)
 ‘The apples were on the table and they still are’
 → Use of preterite can be acceptable under an episodic reading of the stative predicate
- c) *Generic, habitual readings are expressed in the imperfect*
 (20) a. En su niñez, jugaban en la calle por las tardes. (√ IMP)
 b. En su niñez, jugaron en la calle por las tardes. (#PRET)
 ‘In their childhood, they used to play/played in the streets in the afternoon.’
 → This is better with imperfect, but preterite is not really degraded.
 Rather, the interpretation is with the repeated events grouped as a whole.
- d) *Preterite is used to mark punctual unique events*
 (21) a. El terremoto sacudió la ciudad a las 8. (√PRET)
 b. El terremoto sacudía la ciudad a las 8. (#IMP)
 ‘The earthquake shook the city at eight.’
- e) *Iterative readings of punctual events are expressed with preterite*
Aspectual coercion
 (22) a. El terremoto sacudió la ciudad por días. (√ PRET)
 b. El terremoto sacudía la ciudad por días. (# IMP)
 ‘The earthquake shook the city for days.’
- Iteration adverbial phrases*
 (23) a. El terremoto sacudió la ciudad repetidamente. (√ PRET)
 b. El terremoto sacudía la ciudad repetidamente. (#IMP)
 ‘The earthquake shook the city repeatedly’

Let’s consider some of the possibilities for learning patterns. Learners may simply do better with the cases that fall under the pedagogical description, and do well in (a)-(d) but poorly with (e). In contrast, if availability of coercion itself was a problem, we predicted that learners would simply do very well in the coerced cases, but for the wrong reasons. Crucially, in the iterative coercion case (condition e) example 22), a learner who fails to coerce is predicted to still select the perfective tense, at least to the extent in which he or she chooses the preterite in the simple case of the unique event in condition (d), or in the perfectivity pre-test in condition (a). Failing to perform coercion will simply lead them to ignore the iterative meaning and fail to reconcile the temporality of the main predication with the temporality of the adverbial clause. This type of learner would appear to have attainment but in fact have underlying semantic difficulties not evident in this task.

Alternatively, learners may know when a homogeneous predicate is required (i.e., have attained the ±perfective feature associated with the preterite/imperfect distinction, but fail to be aware that the required operators are different, one for specific events (ITER), and another for unique events (HAB). This learner may do well with the habitual cases because it is taught, but will show difficulty in doing so with the coercion cases and with iterative adverbs.

These predictions, summarized in Table 1, were tested via two pencil and paper tasks: a translation task and a grammaticality judgment task. Participants were not aware of the specific focus on the preterite and imperfect. The translation task included 16 sentences, 2 per condition plus 4

distractors. Subjects were instructed to write down the first thing that came to their mind, and to not correct their first answer if they later thought of a better answer. The grammaticality judgment task, which was inspired in part by Montrul and Slabakova (2002), contained 40 items plus 10 distractors. Each condition was presented in 8 tokens, counterbalanced across preterite and imperfect. The state and telic cases, as a test of perfectivity, were conceived of as one test, although we report them below independently.

Table 1. Prediction for test sentences. √ indicates tendency to accept and produce, ~ indicates tendency not to accept or produce the given combinations.

	Perfectivity (telic/state)		Habitual		Unique		Coerced Iterative		Adverbial Iterative	
	pret	imp	pret	imp	pret	imp	pret	imp	pret	imp
Native grammar	~	√	~	√	√	~	√	~	√	~
Attainment without coercion	~	√	~	√	√	~	√ (wrong reason?)	~	√	~
Lacks gen/specific distinction Has coercion	~	√	~	√ (taught)	√	~	~	√	~	√
Only shows effect of instruction	~	√	~	√	√	~	~	√	~	√

4. Results

4.1 Results on translation task.

Twenty-three subjects participated in the study. Ten participants were native speakers of Spanish and twelve were L2 speakers who had English as an L1 and had approximately 3 years of classroom instruction in Spanish. Subjects were recruited in Spanish classes at the University of Toronto, but testing was administered individually. The translation task shows native speakers performing close to predictions for all conditions, with performances over 85% or higher according to the target description.

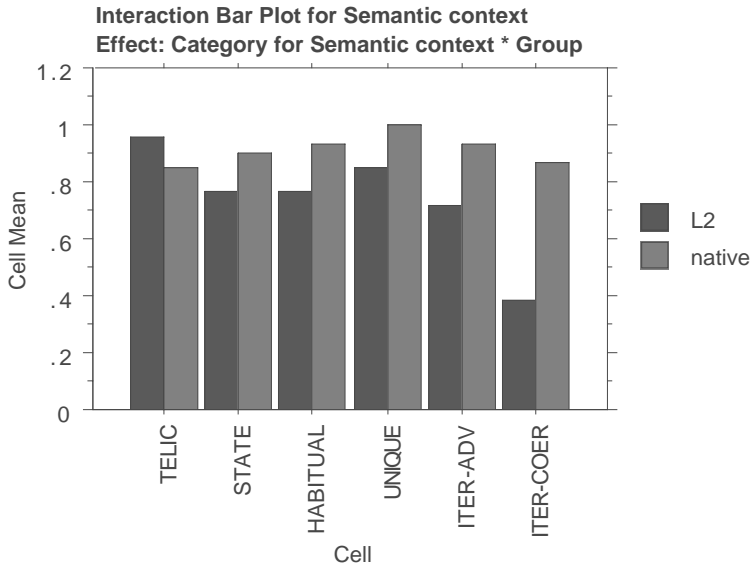


Figure 1. Proportion of target responses to the different conditions for L2 and native speakers of Spanish

L2 subjects performed near ceiling with telic predicates as in (a), close to 80% in all other conditions except the iteratives where they obtained near 71% correct for the adverbial iterative, and a strikingly low performance with the coercion case (about 38%). An ANOVA on the proportion of target responses to the different semantic conditions showed a significant effect of group ($F_{1,21}=8.507$, $p=.009$), a highly significant effect of semantic context ($F_{5,105}=4.481$, $p=.001$) and significant interaction ($F_{5,105}=3.571$, $p=.005$). Figure 1 represents these results.

4.2 Results on grammaticality judgment task for semantically well-formed sentences.

The same subjects participated in the judgment task. For semantically felicitous sentences, overall, native speaker participants exhibited more certainty with all conditions than did the non-natives, with the exception of sentences in the telic condition, which obtained a strong negative score. That natives consistently treated these sentences as anomalous suggests a problem with this subset of the materials. With the exception of that condition, L2 participants gave in principle the same types of answers as natives.

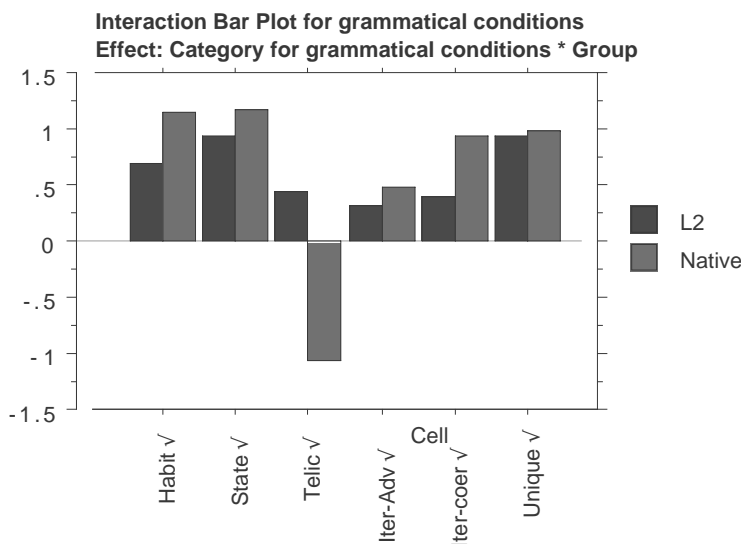


Figure 2. Mean ratings of semantically well-formed sentences for L2 and native speakers of Spanish

Figure 2 shows that the most sizeable differences in ratings between L2 subjects and native speakers appeared with the iterative coercion sentences, and, less markedly, with the habitual contexts. Both groups gave rather low ratings to the iterative adverbial contexts. Statistical analysis shows no main effect of group ($F_{1,15}=.003$, $p=.956$, highly significant effect of grammatical condition ($F_{5,75}=6.363$, $p<.000$) and significant interaction ($F_{5,75}=3.421$, $p=.007$), but we acknowledge that this analysis is to be interpreted cautiously because of the unusual native speaker response to the telic condition. That problem aside, most sizeable effects of group appear for habitual and for the iterative of coercion cases.

4.3 Results on grammaticality judgment task for semantically ill-formed sentences

For semantically anomalous sentences, native speakers gave negative scores to all conditions. The anomaly elicited by telic and state sentences was not as clearly detected in this test. The L2 subjects, in contrast, performed rather poorly. They are only able to clearly reject unique sentences. Their scores are close to neutral for iterative adverbials, habituals and state sentences, and clearly positive for the telic and the iterative condition. An ANOVA revealed statistical significance for both the main effect of Group ($F_{1,15}=15.103$, $p=.002$) and of Condition ($F_{5,75}=4.035$, $p <.003$), but the Group*Condition interaction was not significant ($F_{5,75}=1.056$, $p=.391$). Although the interaction was not significant, we see the most differences from native speakers in the case of the telic sentences, both types of iterative sentences, and with habituals.

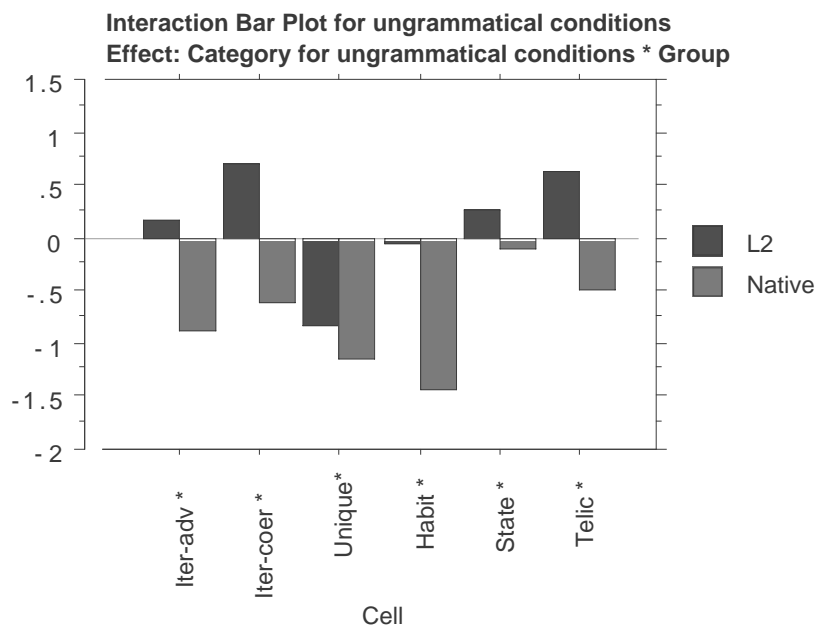


Figure 3. Mean ratings of semantically anomalous sentences for L2 and native speakers of Spanish

5. Conclusions

To summarize, despite some localized methodological problems in the judgment task, the data present a clear picture of strengths and weaknesses in learners' aspectual treatment of punctual events. The various portions of this study consistently point to clear, strong responses with the unique event sentences. This is important as these sentences provide the baseline for evaluating the iterative sentences, as they were almost identical in form to these except for the presence of the duration phrase, or the iterative adverb in the two iterative conditions. The data clearly point to the iterative of coercion condition as a locus of competence difference between native speakers and L2 speakers of Spanish. Overall, this context elicited less certainty in positive judgments, high rates of incorrect acceptances of imperfect tense, and strikingly low proportions of target responses (again, showing a bias towards use of the imperfect). For the iterative adverbials case, there also seemed to be some problems, but the qualitative picture is less clear. In translation, subjects produced fewer correct responses than for the other conditions. In the judgment task, the L2 participants gave rather neutral responses to both the semantically well-formed cases as well as the semantically ill-formed sentences. In the former but not in the latter, this contrasted with native speaker performance.

The L2 speakers failed to detect the semantic anomaly arising from the presentation of habitual sentences in the preterite. These speakers gave, on average, ratings that were fairly neutral and substantially different from those of native speakers. Performance with imperfect was rather low, but no evidence of difficulties was observed in the translation tasks. For the other contexts, the data show target performance with the translation task, but the picture revealed by the judgment task is much less clear.

In these results, we see that there is more to tense and aspect than mastering morphology. While all learners show productive ability to use both past tenses, it is not clear that the semantic properties are in place. This calls into question the usefulness of the learnability models built on the strong morphosyntactic position, where the morphological structure of specific languages is believed to have direct link to particular tense interpretations. So, in addition to the empirical problem pointed out by Schmitt (2001) concerning the existence of languages with nearly identical verbal paradigms but diverging semantics, we also see in acquisition that divergence from target semantics can appear despite mastery of morphology. The specific locus of difficulty in selection of preterite versus

imperfect for the learners in our study appears to be most evident with the aspectual coercion cases where a punctual event is interpreted as iterative by virtue of interaction with a duration adverbial. We suggest that failure in this case (which is different from the one explored in Montrul and Slabakova 2002), indicates that L2 subjects have coercion. If learners failed to coerce, their performance in this context should be similar to the simple punctual unique event. However, failure in this domain suggests that they interpret the iterativity of the coercion contexts correctly, and proceed to be persuaded that using the imperfect may be appropriate. However, performance with iterative adverbials suggests that this failure is not purely a deleterious effect of performance. If learners were simply taking the classroom advice that past repeated events should be expressed in the imperfect, we would expect to see identical patterns of performance differences for both contexts, one where the iteration of the events is lexically expressed, and the other where it is forced or coerced. That learners do not do as well in judging habitual contexts either also argues against a simplistic effect of incorrect pedagogical description.

Rather, the picture that emerges is one where learners do well with simple semantic selection cases, but where their performance declines in computationally complex contexts. Whether learners' difficulties are ultimately shown to be performance-related, or may be evidence of incomplete lexical semantic representation of the tenses (possibly as pertaining to the generic/specific distinction), remains to be clarified in future research. The data presented here, however, indicate that L2 learners perform unevenly in the aspectual domain. In agreement with Slabakova (2001), we believe difficulties lie in lexical learning, not on the morphosyntax of L2 grammars. To the extent that these findings are valid, they support Coppieters' original intuition that the aspectual domain indeed presents a specific challenge for the L2 learner.

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