

# Exploring the Relationship between Transfer and Input in the Acquisition of the Spanish Passives

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## 1. Introduction

The difference between adjectival and verbal passives has been explored since the 1970s (Wasow 1977; Levin and Rappaport 1986, among others). In Spanish, verbal passives take the copula *ser* and adjectival passives take the copula *estar*.

Schmitt (1992), Lema (1992) and Luján (1981) have suggested that the difference between the two copular verbs in Spanish, *ser* and *estar*, is aspectual. According to Schmitt, *ser* is unmarked for aspect and derives its aspectual interpretation from the type of predicate. *Estar*, in contrast, represents the result state of an accomplishment verb, which corresponds very closely to what an adjectival passive is. It is not surprising, therefore, that the two types of passives are realized with the two different copulas.

Only recently has the acquisition of the two copulas been studied systematically (VanPatten 1985; 1987; Geeslin 2001; 2002a; 2002b). Although not studied so far, the acquisition of the two passives constitutes an interesting problem for learnability in relation to second languages. In the first place, the two types of passive exist in most languages, including English. This should give the learners an advantage when acquiring the passives in Spanish. However, in Spanish the distinction is encoded in two different verbs which are notoriously difficult to master, in particular because many adjectives and participles often appear with either one. As has been noted since the 1960s (Stockwell, Bowen and Martin 1965; Schwartz and Sprouse 1997) a distinction that exists in one language but not in another may be very difficult to acquire.

This paper will report on the results of an experiment that explores the relationship between knowledge of the two copular verbs, whose underlying aspectual properties the learner has to derive from the input, and the possibility of transfer of the underlying properties of the passive. We assume that if the learner has acquired the aspectual difference between the two copulas s/he will be able to apply this to the expression of the passive. We therefore tested knowledge of *ser* and *estar* by examining their acceptance with different types of predicates, including the stage level and individual level predicates. Our main objective was to test knowledge of the two passives, which is what we will be reporting on here.

## 2. Passives

Many languages include two types of passives: a verbal passive, that denotes an event and can therefore express an agent, and an adjectival passive, which denotes a state (Levin and Rappaport 1986). In English, verbal passives are very productive in that it is possible to form a passive from almost any transitive verb. The formation of an adjectival passive is far more restricted, leading some researchers to argue that the adjectival passive is linked to changes in the lexicon (see Wasow 1977; 1980). Wasow (1977) developed several tests for adjectival passives, including the possibility of

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prefixing the participle with *un-* (e.g. untouched, uninhabited), and inserting the phrase *very much* before the participle (e.g. very much respected).

Although not all tests work for Spanish, it seems clear that in Spanish the adjectival passive is expressed by means of the verb *estar* ‘to be’ and a past participle, while verbal passives are expressed with the verb *ser*, also ‘to be’. Although the tests proposed by Wasow do not always work in Spanish, there is a relatively strong body of evidence for a similar pattern in both languages. In the first place, passives formed with *estar* and a past participle always express a resulting state and the agent, if there is one, cannot be expressed, as illustrated in (1a). Because *estar* expresses a state, it generally appears in the imperfect and not the simple preterit when referring to the past. In contrast, the passive constructed with *ser* denotes an event, can take an agent in a *by* phrase, and its canonical past tense is the simple preterit, as shown in (1b). Unlike (1a), in which the dinner was already prepared when the speaker arrived, in (1b) the preparing of the supper is interpreted as an event taking place preceding the act of arrival.

- (1) a. La cena estaba (\*estuvo) preparada (\*por Carmen) cuando llegué a casa.  
 ‘The dinner was (imperfect) prepared (\*by Carmen) when I got home.’
- b. La cena fue (#era) preparada por Carmen cuando llegué a casa.  
 ‘The dinner was (preterit) prepared by Carmen when I got home.’

As in English, not all participles can take the prefix *in-* (Varela 1992; 2000) but when they do they generally take the verb *estar* without an agent as in (2a). There are some exceptions, in which the participle, generally formed from a stative verb, can be used to express an intrinsic characteristic of a noun as in (2b). In other words, it functions as an individual level predicate and no longer as a real participle.

- (2) a. Esta casa está (\*es) inacabada (\*por Carmen).  
 ‘This house is unfinished (\*by Carmen).’
- b. Esa palabra es inacentuada.  
 ‘That word is unaccented.’ (It does not take an accent, not ‘there is no accent on it now).’

Another possible test in Spanish is to precede the participle with the modifying adverb (*muy*) *bien*, as shown in (3). Again, this can only be done if the auxiliary is the verb *estar* and there is no agent.

- (3) La carne está (\*es) muy bien preparada (\*por Carmen).  
 ‘The meat is very well prepared (\*by Carmen).’

The difference between the two passives is related to aspect, that is, the difference between events and states. It is therefore not surprising that in Spanish they are realized by different copulas given the facts that current analyses of *ser* and *estar* have brought to light. In the first place, it has been noted (Varela 1992) that the participles used in verbal passives and those used in adjectival passives differ in their aspectual interpretation. For example, in (4a), with the verb *ser*, the interpretation points to the beginning of the act of building, while the same sentence with the verb *estar* (4b) points to the end, that is, the resulting state.

- (4) a. La casa será construida en marzo. (Varela, 1992, p. 225)  
 ‘The house will be built in March.’ <beginning>
- b. La casa estará construida en marzo.  
 ‘The house will be built in March.’ <end result>

According to other researchers the difference is not to be found in the participle, but rather in the nature of the two copulas. Lema (1992), Luján (1981) and Schmitt (1992) argue that the difference

between them is aspectual. According to Schmitt (1992) “*ser* is underspecified with respect to aspect...*estar* corresponds to the result state of an accomplishment verb”. This explains why *ser* can take individual level predicates, while *estar* is restricted to stage level predicates. As a consequence, the subject of *ser* can be interpreted as generic (5a), while the subject of *estar* cannot (5b).

- (5) a. Los policías son nerviosos.  
 ‘(The) policemen are nervous’ (can refer to policemen in general or to a group of policemen)
- b. Los policías están nerviosos.  
 ‘The policemen are nervous’ (can only refer to a specific group)

To summarize, the fact that the two copulas are used in Spanish to express the difference between the two passives follows naturally from the intrinsic aspectual difference between them. An adjectival passive expresses a state so it is to be expected that it is realized with the copula used for this purpose, *estar*. Only *ser* can accommodate events such as verbal passives.

### 3. Learnability

The acquisition of the passive constitutes an interesting problem for acquisition. On the one hand, the difference between the adjectival and verbal passives exists in English, the first language of the learners. Assuming the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis (Schwartz and Sprouse 1996; 1997), there should, in principle, be no problem for L2 learners to acquire the difference in Spanish. On the other hand, in order for the English learners of Spanish to acquire the two forms of the verb ‘to be’ (*ser* and *estar*), they must map the knowledge they may implicitly have of the structure of these two forms onto the two copulas. To do so they must first derive from the input the difference between them, namely, that their distributional properties can be accounted for in terms of aspect. It has been argued for a long time that a distinction found in the L2 which is not present in the L1 may be difficult to acquire (Stockwell, Bowen and Martin 1965; Schwartz and Sprouse 1997). In many situations, the difference between sentences using one or the other copula may be quite subtle. For example, in (6a), given the presence of the verb *ser*, the sentence must be interpreted as an event. Therefore, *la comida*, the subject, cannot refer to food, its most common interpretation, but to a meal. This is in contrast to (6b), which simply describes the place the food is to be found in.

- (6) a. La comida es en la casa.  
 ‘The dinner is (takes place) at the house.’
- b. La comida está en la casa.  
 ‘The food is in the house’

To further complicate the matter, our poor understanding of these two verbs is reflected in our teaching. Not only do students receive long lists of rules which are impossible to produce under pressure, but the learners are misinformed. Among other things, they are often given the impression that, apart from a short list of adjectives that can only appear with *estar* (*lleno*, ‘full’, *contento*, ‘happy’, etc) most alternate between the two copulas, although sometimes with a change in meaning. But this does not come close to explaining the difference between a stage level predicate and an individual level predicate, which is probably unteachable anyway.

The third problem is related to historical change and dialectal variation. Students faced with teachers from different regions will hear different uses. It has been shown that the use of these verbs is in flux, not only in the United States, where there may be pressure from English to simplify, but also in Mexico (Silva-Corvalán 1986). In other regions, usage may be more conservative. For example, in most dialects, a location must be introduced by *estar*. In the dialect of one of the authors, from Colombia, use of the copula with location depends on whether the subject is movable or permanent (*el libro está en la mesa*, ‘the book is on the table’, *Madrid es en España* ‘Madrid is in Spain’).

Finally, the use of the verbal passive in Spanish is quite rare, given that there is another form of the passive, the impersonal, which is generally the preferred choice. In one of the tasks presented to the participants of this subject, monolingual Spanish speakers preferred to translate an English verbal passive by a Spanish impersonal.

Our understanding of the acquisition of the two copulas is just beginning. According to VanPatten (VanPatten 1985; VanPatten 1987) learners go through stages in the acquisition of the copulas, with exclusive use of *ser* at the beginning, and use of *estar* progressively spreading through the next three stages. Geeslin (2000; 2002), following Silva Corvalán (Silva-Corvalán 1986; 1994) uses two constraints, the Frame of Reference Constraint and the Susceptibility to Change Constraint, to show that second language acquisition mirrors language change. However, a great deal needs to be done. This paper aims at contributing to our understanding of one of the uses of the two copulas, to distinguish the two types of passives.

### 3. Experiment

#### 3.1 Participants

The experiment included two groups: A group of 9 English L1 learners of Spanish as a second language and a group of 10 native speakers of Spanish. The L2 group was made up of learners who began to study Spanish at or after puberty. Some of them were living in a Spanish speaking country at the time of testing, others were in North America. All were interviewed orally, and the taped interviews were subsequently judged by two native speakers on four criteria (morphology, syntax, phonology, and vocabulary), who gave them an overall rating between 7 and 10 (where 10= native speaker).

The control group consisted of 10 Spanish L1 speakers. None of these participants was an early bilingual although all spoke English to a certain degree. They came from different Hispanic countries, with a majority from Colombia.

#### 3.2 Description of tests

The participants completed three tasks. The first of these was a grammaticality judgement task consisting of 70 sentences ranging over 14 types, 5 tokens for each type. However, 20 of these sentences (4 types) looked at the copulas with stage level and individual level predicates, which we will not be reporting on in this paper. This leaves a total of 50 sentences, with 10 types. They contrasted the use of the two copulas in passive constructions regarding the presence or absence of an agent, as shown in (7), aspect (simple past vs. imperfect) (8), participles with the prefix *in-* (9). Each sentence appeared twice, once with *ser* and once with *estar*.

- (7) a. Aquí la comida es/\*está preparada por un cocinero profesional.  
 here the food is prepared by a cook professional  
 ‘The food here is prepared by a professional cook.’
- b. Aquí la comida es/está preparada antes de la llegada de los clientes.  
 here the food is prepared before the arrival of the clients  
 ‘Here the food is prepared before the arrival of the clients.’
- (8) a. El libro fue/\*estuvo escrito en Inglaterra.  
 the book was (pret) written in England  
 ‘The book was written in England.’
- b. El artículo \*era/estaba escrito en inglés.  
 the article was (imp) written in English  
 ‘The article was written in English.’

- (9) El libro estaba/\*era inacabado.  
 the book was unfinished  
 ‘The book was unfinished.’

The second task completed was a selection task. The participants read a short scenario, and were then given two sentences, one with *ser* and one with *estar*. They were asked to judge whether one or the other was acceptable, whether neither was acceptable or whether both were acceptable. In this paper we will be reporting the results of 10 scenarios which examined the interpretation of the subject of each of the copulas. Recall that if the copula *ser* is used the subject may be interpreted as generic. In other words, if the story forced a generic interpretation, the participants could not choose the verb *estar*. There were 5 scenarios of this type (10). On the other hand, if the subject referred to a specific element, then from a syntactic point of view both *ser* and *estar* are possible, though 5 stories were constructed in such a way that there was a strong preference for *estar* (11).

- (10) A Carlos no le gusta la comida del Perú. Siempre se queja. Carlos dice:

- a. En el Perú el pescado es preparado crudo.
- b. En el Perú el pescado está preparado crudo.
- c. Ni *a* ni *b*
- d. Ambas, *a* y *b*

‘Carlos does not like the food from Peru. He always complains. Carlos says:

- a. In Peru fish is (*ser*) prepared raw. (Correct answer)
- b. In Peru fish (*estar*) is prepared raw. (Incorrect answer)
- c. Neither *a* nor *b*. (Possible answer)
- d. Both *a* and *b*. (Incorrect answer)

- (11) El Sr. Ramírez no quiere tomarse el café. No le gusta el sabor. El Sr. Ramírez dice:

- a. Este café es preparado a la americana.
- b. Este café está preparado a la americana.
- c. Ni *a* ni *b*
- d. Ambas, *a* y *b*

‘Mr. Ramírez does not want to drink his coffee. He does not like the taste. Mr. Ramírez says:

- a. This coffee is (*ser*) prepared American style. (Incorrect answer)
- b. This coffee is (*estar*) prepared American style. (Correct answer)
- c. Neither *a* nor *b* (Incorrect answer)
- d. Both, *a* and *b*. (Incorrect answer)

In this paper we will not be reporting on the results of the third test, which was a translation task.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Grammaticality vs. ungrammaticality

Figure 1 shows the overall results for grammaticality in the grammaticality judgment task. As the figure shows, both groups distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences. A two factor analysis of variance, repeated measures, between grammaticality and L1 groups yields no significant difference by L1 group, ( $F(1, 17)=.001, p=.9759$ ). However, it does show a significant difference for grammaticality ( $F(13, 221)=42.567, p=.0001$ ) and for interaction ( $F(13, 221)=4.006, p=.0001$ ). We will now turn to the comparisons of each of the contrasts.

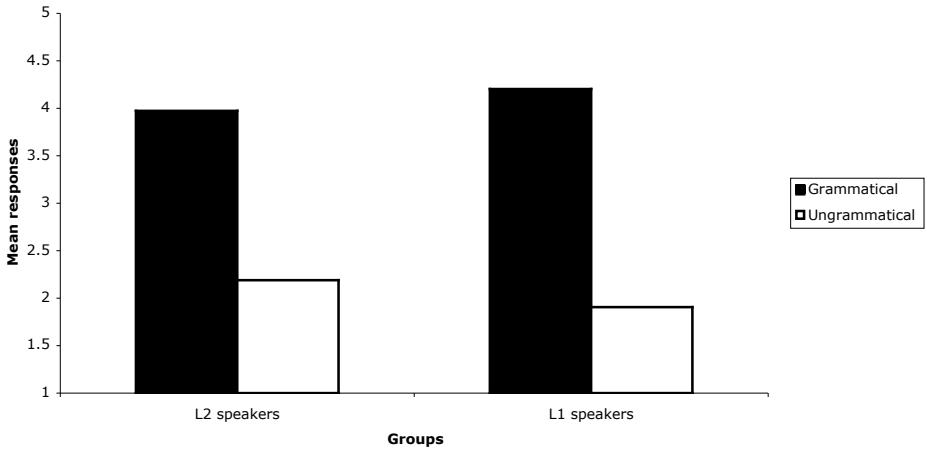


Figure 1: Grammaticality vs. ungrammaticality.

#### 4.2. Agentivity

Recall that only the passive with *ser*, which denotes an event, can take an agent. Four types of sentences examined this property: (a) *ser* without an agent, (b) *estar* without an agent, (c) *ser* with an agent, and (d) *estar* with an agent. Only (d) is ungrammatical. Figure 2 illustrates the results.

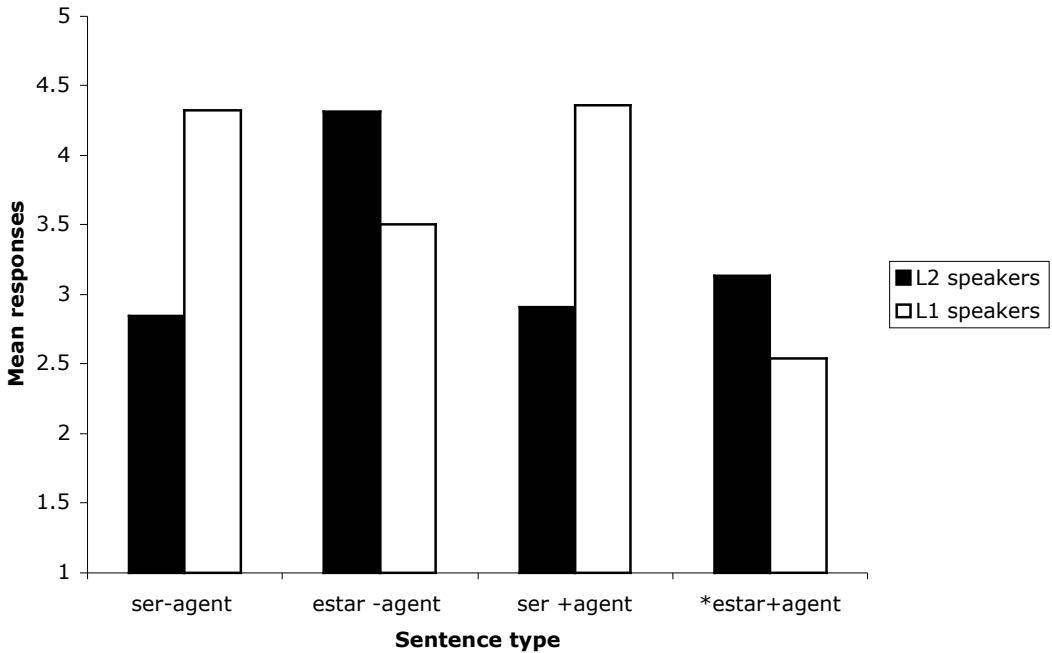


Figure 2: Agentivity

The first and third set of columns show that the L2 speakers do not accept verbal passives, with or without an agent. This is in contrast to the monolinguals who accepted them as grammatical. However,

both groups accept *estar* without an agent (second set of columns), although the controls do so to a lesser extent. Finally, the controls clearly reject the ungrammatical *estar* + agent sentences, but the L2 speakers seem to prefer them slightly to the *ser* + agent sentences. In fact, there is no significant difference between the responses of the L2 speakers to the contrast between sentences with an agent, that is, those with *ser* which are grammatical and those with *estar*, which are ungrammatical ( $F(1,8)=.14, p=.718$ ). It seems that this distinction has not been acquired.

### 4.3. Aspect

Recall that because verbal passives refer to events with an end point, they generally appear in the simple past (preterit). In contrast, adjectival passives refer to a state, and therefore, under normal conditions, they appear in the imperfect. This contrast was measured with four sets of sentences: (a) *ser* in the preterit, grammatical; (b) *ser* in the imperfect, ungrammatical; (c) *estar* in the preterit, ungrammatical; and (d), *estar* in the imperfect, grammatical. Figure 3 shows the results of these contrasts.

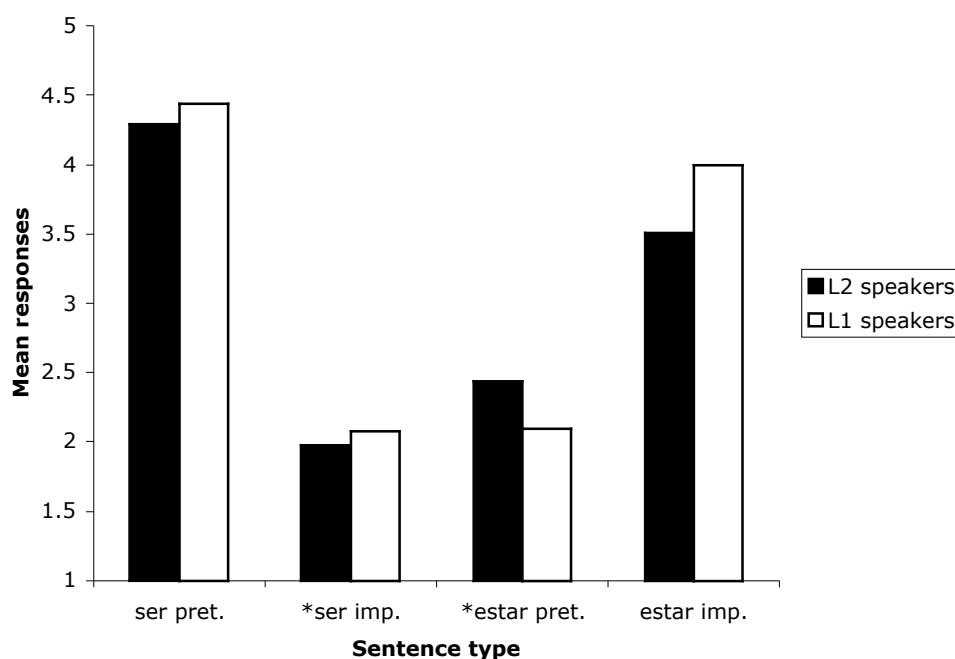


Figure 3: aspect

As we see in Figure 3, both groups of speakers make the correct distinctions in the case of aspect, correctly accepting the preterit for the verbal passives and rejecting the imperfect; correctly rejecting the preterit for the adjectival passives and accepting the imperfect.

### 4.4. Prefix *-in*

Similarly to English *-un*, the presence of the prefix *-in* on the participle in Spanish generally signals an adjectival passive, therefore the copula used must be the verb *estar*. This contrast was tested with two sets of sentences: (a) *ser* + an *-in* participle, ungrammatical; (b) *estar* + an *-in* participle, grammatical. The results are illustrated in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Prefix *-in*

Both groups of speakers seem to have the relevant contrast, rejecting verbal passives that contain a participle prefixed by *-in*, accepting the adjectival passives.

#### 4.5. Generic subjects

Genericity of the subject was tested in the story task with two types of sentences: (a) stories that forced a generic interpretation, in which case the possible choices were the sentence with *ser* or a rejection of both; (b) stories that led to a specific interpretation in which the adjectival passive was the correct choice. We decided to accept as correct a response of ‘neither’ for the verbal passives because of the strong preference that a native speaker may have for the impersonal passive in many of these situations. The important thing to note is that a choice of *estar* is ungrammatical given that the subject is generic if the story is interpreted correctly. Therefore a choice of the adjectival passive or of both options would be incorrect. The results are illustrated in Figure 5.

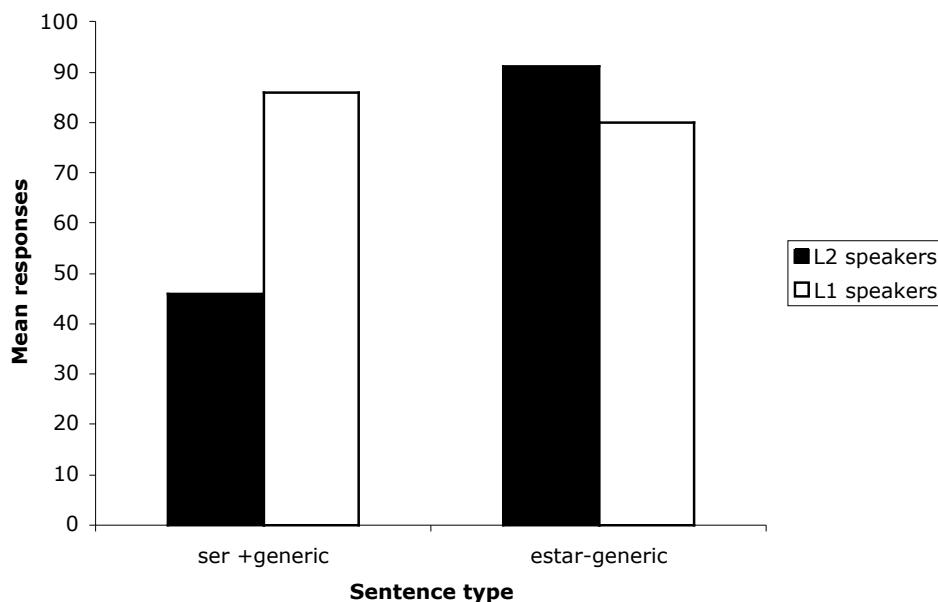


Figure 5: Genericity

The control group behaves as expected, as the figure shows. The L2 speakers, on the other hand, seem to be overgeneralizing the use of *estar*. This leads to correct judgments in the case of the non-generic subjects, but it leads to an incorrect judgment in the case of the verbal passives.

## 5. Discussion

The aim of the present paper was to determine whether L2 learners of an advanced level have been able to acquire the difference between adjectival passives, realized with the copula *estar*, and verbal passives, realized with the copula *ser*. On the one hand, the distinction between the two types of passives exists in English. Transfer from English would therefore be an asset. On the other hand, the fact that the learners must map the distinction onto the two Spanish copulas may be problematic. The distinction between the two does not exist, at least overtly, in English, and the input can be confusing. Although we have assumed, following several researchers (Lema 1992; Luján 1981; Schmitt 1992) that the difference between the two copulas is mainly aspectual, other scholars have argued that this is only one among many features that distinguish between them (Silva-Corvalán 1991; 1994; Geeslin 2002). Geeslin (2002) has argued that an analysis based on features more clearly explains not only the process of acquisition but also of language change. However, it does seem to be the case that it is the aspectual difference that best explains the use of the two copulas in the two types of passive.

Assuming, as we do, that UG constrains L2 acquisition (White 2003) our results are clearly disappointing. Two of the properties we studied, agentivity and genericity, have not been acquired, and these are perhaps the most subtle ones. The use of the correct past tense to distinguish between states and events produced positive results, as well as the presence or absence of the prefix *-in*, which was effectively used by these speakers to choose the adjectival passive with the verb *estar* over the verbal passive. It may be the case that this is a more direct form of transfer from English, where the presence of the prefix *-un* clearly marks a state.

We have suggested that the input for the two copulas may not be clear enough to lead to acquisition. There are two problems with this. In the first place, the distinction between the copulas is learned by children, therefore there must be some trigger in the input that guides them. The main difference between first language acquisition and the speakers in the present study is that the learners in this case speak a language that realizes both types of passives with the same verb. The correct

interpretation of the results must be that it is the input in relation to the L1 that makes acquisition difficult. The L1 acts as a filter that does not allow the learners to access the trigger.

The second problem is related to the learner's knowledge of the copulas. Because of constraints on space, we are not able to look at those sections of the test that looked at knowledge of the copulas with adjectival predicates. However, the results lead us to conclude that the learners have acquired the distinction quite well. It could be said that learners have practiced the two copulas with adjectives *ad nauseam* in classes (though not all of our subjects learned in a formal setting). However, in the section of the story task which tested the possibilities regarding the generic interpretation of the subject, which is not taught, the results contrast sharply with those found for the passives. Recall that the L2 speakers incorrectly accepted *estar* as the answer around 60% of the time when a subject was interpreted as generic in the case of passives. Their average of incorrect responses was under 10% when the verb appeared with an adjective and not a participle (*Los niños son cariñosos* 'children are loving' vs. *Los niños están cariñosos* 'the children are loving (now)'). This result is very surprising, as it is not clear why learners would correctly interpret the subject in the case of an adjective but not a participle.

To summarize, the results of this study do not lead us to a clear conclusion. It would seem that transfer of the underlying properties of passives in English is not sufficient to allow L2 learners to map the two types of passives onto the two copulas, in spite of the fact that the main differences between the two copulas may have been acquired. Further research into this matter is certainly needed.

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