

Second vs. Third Language Acquisition of Tense and Agreement in French by Vietnamese Monolinguals and Cantonese-English Bilinguals

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1. Introduction

Up until present, the field of “Second” Language Acquisition (SLA) was dominated by studies on “second” language acquisition (L2A); research on third language acquisition (L3A) has been underplayed irrespective of theoretical frameworks. This paper constitutes part of a larger project (Leung 2002b) which looks at L3A from the generative linguistic/Universal Grammar (UG) perspective. The author’s earlier published work (Leung 2001, 2002a) on the nominal functional domain (i.e. the Determiner Phrase (DP), the formal feature [\pm definite] and the functional category Number) has provided strong evidence for L2 transfer in L3A, demonstrating that L3A is *not* the same as L2A at least as far as the initial state is concerned: if L3A were simply another case of L2A, then transfer should always come from L1; however, what the author’s previous studies have shown is that in L3A, transfer does *not* necessarily come from L1.

In order to further attest the claim that L3A is different from L2A and to examine the potential parallelisms between the verbal and the nominal functional domains in L3A from the generative/UG perspective, this paper set out to investigate the acquisition of the formal features associated with the functional category of T(ense), namely, finiteness ([\pm finite]), agreement and [\pm past] in French as L3 vs. L2 by Cantonese-English bilinguals (i.e. native speakers of Hong Kong Cantonese who are proficient but non-native English speakers) and Vietnamese monolinguals (i.e. native speakers of Vietnamese who do not speak any English).

2. From L2A to L3A

In this paper, we compare the predictions of two current competing models in the field of theoretical second language acquisition, namely, the Failed Features Hypothesis (FFH) and Full Transfer Full Access (FTFA) and examine their potential applicability to L3A.

The Failed Features Hypothesis (FFH) (Hawkins 1998, 2000; Hawkins & Chan 1997; Smith & Tsimpli 1995) can be considered as a modern version of “no parameter resetting”, or it can be put under the so-called “impairment” camp in more recent terms. FFH assumes full transfer of L1 in the L2 initial state and predicts the non-availability in L2A of parameterized properties that are not instantiated in L1. The logical extension of this prediction to L3A should be that parameterized properties not instantiated in L1 will never be acquired in L3 either, hence FFH has to predict L1

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transfer in L3 initial state. The general prediction of FFH on L3A/*L_n*A as per the interpretation of the author of this paper is therefore persistent L1 transfer effects leading to ultimate “failure” of parameterized (functional) properties from the L3/*L_n* initial state all through to the L3/*L_n* final state.

Full Transfer Full Access (FTFA) (Schwartz & Sprouse 1994, 1996), on the other hand, is an L2 “parameter resetting” model. To phrase it with more updated terminology, it can be grouped under the “no impairment” camp. In L2A, the “full transfer” part of FTFA predicts full transfer of L1 in the L2 initial state while the “full access” part predicts possibility of UG-based restructuring in subsequent stages of L2 development. Applying the model to L3A, in principle, unlike FFH, there is no restriction on FTFA as to where transfer in the L3 initial state comes from since its predictions do not hinge on “failures” attributable to L1. In other words, parameterized properties are ultimately acquirable in L2, L3...*L_n* final states. In this light, the interpretation based on the author of this paper is that FTFA when applied to L3A would predict full transfer in the L3/*L_n* initial state but the source is not restricted to L1. This prediction is contingent upon other factors identified in the L3 (psycholinguistic) literature to date (see for instance the collections of papers in Cenoz & Jessner 2000 and Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner 2001), such as typology, psychotypology, the “Second Language Factor” or recency, dominance, etc. How these factors interact and the relative significance of each of them in determining the exact source of transfer in L3A is beyond the scope of this paper. We leave the issue open for future research. What we would like to emphasise here is that FTFA and FFH make very different predictions with respect to the L3 initial state and that our goal is to demonstrate that transfer in L3A does not necessarily come from L1. It would be interesting and relevant to find out what would predict where transfer comes from exactly in each individual L3 case but the lack of such evidence does not undermine the major claim put forward in this work.

3. Theoretical assumptions

As far as English and French are concerned, we follow Chomsky (1995 Ch.4) in assuming the functional category of T to be present in these two languages; Agr as a category is no longer relevant. We further assume that the verbal features associated with T to include [\pm finite] (or [\pm tensed]), which gives the categorial status of T), agreement or *phi*-features of person and number, as well as [\pm past].

Regarding finiteness and the status of Infl in Chinese, the issue is a controversial and tricky one. First, according to Gu (1995), Cheng (1997), amongst others, Chinese sentences are Asp(ect)Ps and it is generally assumed that Chinese languages lack agreement (e.g. Huang 1982). With respect 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 by reanalysing evidence put forward by researchers who have argued for such a distinction. In this paper, we follow Hu *et al.* and take it that a syntactic finite/non-finite distinction does not exist in Chinese languages, including both Cantonese and Mandarin, although we acknowledge the controversial nature of the issue. The assumptions relevant to the properties investigated in this paper are that [\pm finite] (or [\pm tensed]) as the categorial feature required for the projection of T is absent in Chinese and TP is thus not present; agreement and the present/past tense feature [\pm past] are also taken to be absent because of the absence of the corresponding morphology.

Lastly, we discuss the properties of null T and optional [\pm past] in Vietnamese. Descriptively, Vietnamese has no agreement morphology but has two optional tense markers – *se* (future) and *da* (past) which are almost always left out in the spoken/informal register. Duffield (1999, 2000) argues that TP is present in Vietnamese but the head is almost always null; in addition, he contends that the head of Vietnamese clauses is A(ssertion) and both T and A are required in Vietnamese to represent the syntactic notion of “tense”. Hence, on Duffield’s view, the notion of finiteness is distributed across both T and A. It is, however, not exactly clear as to where the formal feature of [\pm finite] in Vietnamese is located in Duffield’s proposed functional architecture of the language. Our position is that there are two formal features on the T head in Vietnamese – [\pm finite/tensed] and [\pm past]: [\pm finite/tensed] is an

obligatory feature that gives the categorial status of T, while [\pm past] is an optional feature that characterizes the two tense morphemes *se* ([-past] and *da* [+past].

4. Hypotheses and predictions

(I) L3 group (Cantonese-English bilinguals)

a. FFH

According to our interpretation, FFH predicts the L3 French initial state to be the L1 Chinese final state (cf. Section 2 above). T and the associated features of [\pm finite], agreement and [\pm past] should be absent in L3 group's French interlanguage.

b. FTFA

FTFA, on the other hand, predicts either L1 or L2 transfer in the L3 initial state. It has the same predictions as FFH if L1 transfer is hypothesized. However, if L2 transfer is being hypothesized, then the L2 English steady state would constitute the L3 French initial state. In this latter case, all the features concerned which have been acquired in the L2 English steady state will be transferred to the L3 French initial state and hence [\pm finite], agreement, [\pm past] will be present in L3 group's English and French.

(II) L2 group (Vietnamese monolinguals)

Both FTFA and FFH predicts full transfer of L1 Vietnamese into the L2 French initial state. Subjects will have problem with agreement in French but [\pm finite] should not pose a problem. In addition, subjects will be sensitive to a past/non-past distinction, although they may not perform as perfectly as French native speakers

Table 1 and Table 2 below summarize the respective predictions of FFH and FTFA regarding our L3 vs. L2 case:

	[\pm finite]	Agreement	[\pm past]
L3 group's Chinese	X	X	X
L3 group's English	X	X	X
L3 group's French (transfer from <i>Chinese</i>[†])	X	X	X
L2 group's Vietnamese	✓	X	(✓)
L2 group's French (transfer from Vietnamese)	✓	X	(✓)

Table 1

Summary of hypotheses for L3 and L2 groups based on FFH[†]

Key: ✓ present or acquired in (inter)language; X absent or failed in (inter)language

	[\pm finite]	Agreement	[\pm past]
L3 group's Chinese	X	X	X
L3 group's English	✓	✓	✓
L3 group's French (transfer from <i>English</i>*)	✓	✓	✓
L2 group's Vietnamese	✓	X	(✓)
L2 group's French (transfer from Vietnamese)	✓	X	(✓)

Table 2

Summary of hypotheses for L3 and L2 groups based on FTFA* (in the case of L2 transfer)

Key: ✓ present or acquired in (inter)language; X absent or failed in (inter)language

5. Methodology

5.1 Participants

Two experimental groups (L3 group and L2 group) and two control groups (French and English) took part in the present study. The L3 group consists of 44 Cantonese-English bilingual undergraduate students who were beginning French learners at the University of Hong Kong (HKU). They were all advanced L2 English speakers and their average age at the time of testing was 20.45. The average language proficiency test scores for these subjects' English and French were 71.84/80 (Michigan) and 19.23/54 (Laval) respectively. As regards the L2 group, it consists of 12 monolingual Vietnamese speakers residing in Montréal, Canada with no English knowledge. These subjects had learned or were learning French as beginners. Their average age was 34.42, and their average Laval French proficiency score was 17.69/54. A two-sample *t*-test shows no significant difference between L2 group and L3 group's French proficiency. In addition, 30 native speakers of French and 31 native speakers of English recruited in Montréal, Canada served as controls in the present study.

5.2 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 [\pm past]. The L3 group completed both the French and English versions of the tasks, with a 7- to 10-day lag and the L2 group completed only the French version. Details of each experimental task are as follows:

5.2.1 Elicited written production task I: composition on [\pm 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 [\pm past] (i.e. correct past tense morphology).

5.2.2 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 (1) below:

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

5.2.3 Grammaticality preference task on finiteness, agreement and [\pm 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 [\pm past] in each language. Examples (one token per type) are given below:

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

6. Results

6.1 Elicited written production task I: composition on [\pm past]

	No. of obligatory contexts	Past tense marking (%)
L3 group's Eng	642	489 (76.17%)
L3 group's Fr	543	436 (80.29%)
L2 group's Fr	142	111 (78.17%)

Table 3

Accuracy rates in elicited written production I (composition) on [\pm past]

As we can observe from Table 3 above, the performance of L2 and L3 groups was very similar in the composition task. Mean accuracy scores were rather high for both groups and no significant difference in the accuracy rates was found between the groups. Turning to L3 group's French vs. English, performance of L3 group in both languages was also comparable, although accuracy scores were slightly higher in the French task. No significant difference in the accuracy rates between the two language of the L3 group was found.

6.2 Elicited written production task II (adapted from Herschensohn 1998): sentence completion on finiteness and agreement

	Finiteness	Agreement
L3 group's Eng (n=44)	92.99%	92.99%
L3 group's Fr (n=44)	97.59%	96.90%
L2 group's Fr (n=12)	79.08%	61.50%
Fr NS control (n=30)	100%	100%
Eng NS control (n=31)	99.45%	99.45%

Table 4

Mean percentages of accurate responses in elicited written production II (sentence completion) on finiteness and agreement

Table 4 above presents the results of finiteness and agreement in the sentence completion task. L3 group's performance on both finiteness and agreement items was native-like, while L2 group's performance was less than perfect. A significant difference was found across the L2 group, the L3 group and the controls on finiteness items ($F(2,83)=9.0318$, $p<.001$) and on agreement items ($F(2,83)=24.0147$, $p<.0001$). Concerning L3 group's French vs. English, subjects' performance on finiteness and agreement was consistent in both languages. A marginally significant difference was found between L3 group's performance in French and English for both finiteness and agreement items (for finiteness, $t(43)=-2.5324$, $p<.05$; for agreement, $t(43)=-2.2146$, $p<.05$) and L3 group's English was significantly different from that of English native controls (for finiteness, $F(1,73)=8.9855$, $p<.005$; for agreement, $F(1,73)=10.0308$, $p<.005$).

6.3 Grammaticality preference task on finiteness, agreement and [\pm past]

Finiteness

	Finiteness (French)				Finiteness (English)		
	<i>Infinit.</i>	<i>Present part.</i>	<i>Past part.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Present part.</i>	<i>Past part.</i>	<i>Mean</i>
L3 group	93.75%	79.50%	75.93%	83.06%	98.41%	97.73%	98.07%
L2 group	70.36%	68.98%	71.67%	70.34%	-	-	-
French NS	100%	100%	97.50%	99.17%	-	-	-
English NS	-	-	-	-	98.39%	97.84%	98.12%

Table 5

Mean percentages of correct responses in grammaticality preference task on finiteness

As indicated by Table 5 above, L3 group performed better than L2 group on finiteness in general in the grammaticality preference task. Specifically, L3 group performed considerably better on infinitive items than on present or past participles, whereas L2 group performed similarly across the three finiteness types. There is a highly significant difference between groups regarding finiteness ($F(2,83)=31.0520$, $p<.0001$). Comparing L3 group's French and English, a highly significant difference was found between the L3 group's performance in French and English ($t(43)=6.9427$, $p<.0001$) but L3 group's English did not differ significantly from the controls.

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>
L3 gp	94.48%	93.75%	94.14%	96.20%	90.91%	99.25%	99.25%	96.40%
L2 gp	72.50%	55.83%	64.17%	-	-	-	-	-
Fr NS	98.23%	99.43%	98.83%	-	-	-	-	-
Eng NS	-	-	-	99.19%	97.58%	99.19%	100%	98.99%

Table 6

Mean percentages of correct responses in grammaticality preference task on agreement

As far as agreement in the grammaticality preference task is concerned, Table 6 above shows that the L3 group out-performed L2 group in this domain. The mean accuracy rate of L2 group was only 64.17%; in particular, the distinction between first and third person plural appeared to be particularly problematic for L2 group. A highly significant difference was found across groups in the French task ($F(2,83)=30.9196$, $p<.0001$). On the other hand, there was no significant difference between L3 group's French and English; L3 group's English was native-like, and it does not differ significantly from the controls.

As shown in Table 7 above, the L2 group and the L3 group performed similarly on the present/past distinction in the grammaticality preference task and no significant difference between the two groups. However, both groups differed highly significantly from the controls ($F(2,83)=9.6361$, $p<.0005$). With respect to L3 group's French vs. English, L3 group performed well in the English task but were not as native-like as they were in other categories such as finiteness and agreement in the same task. The difference between the L3 group's English and the English controls was significant ($F(1,73)=6.006$, $p<.05$). An interesting note is that L3 group performed better on [+past] rather than [-past] in the English task; same phenomenon was not observed in the French task. Finally, as far as the overall results are concerned, there is a significant difference between L3 group's English and French with respect to the feature [\pm past] ($t(43)=3.3505$, $p<.005$).

	French [±past]			English [±past]		
	[+past]	[-past]	Mean	[+past]	[-past]	Mean
L3 group	74.91%	82.55%	78.73%	88.03%	78.35%	83.19%
L2 group	69.28%	76.20%	72.74%	-	-	-
French NS	93.11%	95.57%	94.34%	-	-	-
English NS	-	-	-	95.25%	96.77%	96.01%

Table 7

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

7. Hypotheses and predictions revisited

	[±finite]	Agreement	[±past]
L3 group's English steady state	✓	✓	✓
L3 group's French initial state	✓	✓	✓
L2 group's French initial state	(✓)	✗	(✓)

Table 8

Summary of findings for L3 and L2 groups on tense and agreement

Key: ✓ present or acquired in interlanguage; ✗ absent or failed in interlanguage

(I) L3 group (Cantonese-English bilinguals)

The results on the L3 experimental group have supported full transfer of the L2 English steady state in the L3 French initial state. The data are inconsistent with FFH which predicted the L3 French initial state to be L1 Chinese: if transfer were from L1 Chinese, we would expect the verbal features to be absent from our L3 subjects' interlanguage grammar; this is contrary to what we have found. Our findings support FTFA instead, which has predicted the possibility of L2 transfer: verbal features, though absent in L1 Chinese, have been acquired in the L2 English steady state and these successfully acquired properties in turn transfer to the L3 French initial state.

(II) L2 group (Vietnamese monolinguals)

Full transfer as predicted by FTFA and FFH are strongly supported by the findings on the L2 group. As far as agreement is concerned, both production and judgement data demonstrated that agreement features were not well in place in our subjects' L2 French initial state (mean accuracy rates were less than 65%); these clearly demonstrate transfer effects from Vietnamese in which agreement features are lacking. Regarding finiteness and [±past], however, although subjects' performance was poorer than predicted, our results are not inconsistent with a strong transfer claim: because T head is almost always null in Vietnamese, the feature [±finite], although obligatorily listed in the lexicon, is seldom instantiated in syntax to associate with specific lexical items; besides, as mentioned in Section 3 above, [±past] as a formal feature is optional in Vietnamese. All these may have led to the L2 subjects' less-than-perfect performance on the tense and agreement features in French.

8. Conclusion: on L2A vs. L3A/LnA

To sum up, what we have found in this study is that the L2 group's performance was significantly poorer than that of the L3 group, especially with respect to agreement features. We argue that this is because the L3 group has acquired the relevant properties in English (their L2) which aids the subsequent acquisition of French (the L3) right at the outset; the L2 subjects, on the other hand, do not have this advantage because they have not acquired English as an L2 previously. This attests to our claim that L3A is different from L2A, at least as far as the initial state is concerned. Whether the L2 group is able to catch up with the L3 group beyond the initial state ultimately is an interesting yet

unknown question. An important implication that is nonetheless borne out in our findings with respect to foreign (multiple) language learning is that, the more languages one has acquired, the more beneficial it would be for the acquisition of additional non-native languages, so far as the rate of (successful) acquisition is concerned.

9. Residual problems and future research

Finally, let us briefly discuss a few issues which are indirectly raised in this paper. The first one concerns the theoretical linguistic question of morphology vs. syntax, i.e. whether one should equate the absence of overt morphology with the absence of underlying morpho-syntactic features. This is a highly controversial topic in the field of theoretical linguistics as well as its application to theoretical first and second language acquisition. See White (2003 Ch.6) for a detailed review and discussion; see also Leung (2002b, 2003) for treatment of the issue in the L2/L3 cases covered in this paper. The second question is related to psycholinguistic L3A. In this paper, we have (implicitly) assumed separate linguistic systems/mental lexicons for the different (inter)languages acquired in the multilingual mind. Whether this assumption is correct or not is subject to debate. See Cook (1992), Grosjean (1997), Singleton (1999), Paradis (2000) for some representative positions (i.e. unified vs. separate vs. subsystems). Further research in this area is indispensable for the advancement of a comprehensive theory of transfer in L3A. Lastly, we have mentioned in Section 2 a number of factors identified in the literature on L3A which determine the source of transfer in L3A. Amongst these, typology and psychotypology have been given the most attention. However, as far as the author is aware, no comparative study is available so far that has investigated different combinations of source/target languages with respect to some grammatical property to find out where transfer comes from exactly. In order to shed light on the issue, it is worthwhile to pursue generative L3A further by looking at other syntactic properties across different L3 populations, such as the null subject or *pro*-drop parameter in L1 Cantonese-L2 English-L3 German vs. -L3 Japanese vs. -L3 Spanish. One possible direction is to investigate the interaction between null subjects and agreement (cf. Jaeggli & Safir 1989) in these language combinations, which provides a good case for fine tuning the notion of typology (e.g. proximity of languages on which level of the grammar, e.g. cognates/lexis vs. syntax) and for researchers to arrive at a generalization about the role of typology and psychotypology in (inter)language transfer in L3A.

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