

Methodological Issues in the L2 Acquisition of a Syntax/Semantics Phenomenon: How to Assess L2 Knowledge of Mood in Spanish Relative Clauses

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1. Introduction

There is a growing debate in second language (L2) acquisition as to whether (adult) learners can acquire linguistic phenomena located at the interface between syntax and other modules, for example semantics, pragmatics and lexical-semantics, in contrast to phenomena that are purely syntactic in nature. For some researchers, the interface is precisely the place where fossilization occurs and the source of non-convergence in L2 speakers. This is the view elaborated primarily in Sorace's work (see Sorace 2003, 2004, 2005), which roughly claims that learners can acquire the syntax but sometimes face great obstacles with regards to interpretation. This often results in so-called residual optionality, that is, the fact that even very advanced learners sometimes use non target forms at the same time as target forms, at least some of the time.

The fundamental question is where the optionality comes from: is it related to the grammatical representation (in the sense, e.g., that some categories or features would be absent from interlanguage (IL) grammars (Franceschina 2001; Hawkins and Liszka 2003; Tsimplici 2004; see also Beck 1998; Meisel 1997) or is it related to something else, for example processing in a broad sense, such as lexical access, mapping the forms to the syntax (as claimed, for example, in Haznedar and Schwartz 1997; Lardiere 2000; Prévost and White 2000)?

In this paper we focus on the acquisition of the morphosyntax/semantics interface by examining the acquisition of mood in Spanish relative clauses by native speakers of French. This immediately raises a methodological question. We know that most studies of interface interpretation phenomena rely on interpretation judgment tasks. In such tasks, the learners are typically asked to rate the appropriateness of sentences with respect to previously provided scenarios which are meant to force particular readings (see, for example, Borgonovo and Prévost 2003; Dekydstpotter et al. 1999/2000; Dekydstpotter and Sprouse 2001, among others). However, going from context to linguistic expression – as traditional interpretation tasks do – may not really test whether or not an interpretation triggered by a particular morphosyntactic device has been acquired, but rather that a certain interpretation needs to be marked in a particular way. The difference is subtle but, we think, present. If the experiment proceeds in the traditional direction (i.e., presentation of a context X followed by a choice between sentences W and Y), we would mirror the production side of the equation; on the other hand, the opposite direction, in which the sentence is followed by a choice of contexts, mirrors comprehension, which, as is well known, shows less outside interference. In the first case, we may show that the

* This research was supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada team grant # 410-2004-1226 to P. Prévost (main investigator), A. Androutsopoulou, C. Borgonovo and M. Español-Echevarría (Laval University), and J. Bruhn de Garavito (University of Western Ontario). We would like to thank Geneviève Boudreau, Bruno Guedes Pereira, and Timothy Mellin for their assistance in administrating the tests and running the statistical analyses.

learner has acquired (or not) a link between interpretation and form; in the second case, we in principle show that a certain form triggers, or that a certain piece of morphology primes, a certain interpretation. And this is precisely what we should be testing and showing.

To ascertain whether this second type of test represents an advantage over the first, we elicit, analyze and compare two types of results in this study: one type was obtained in a classical context-to-form task; the second, in a test that takes the learner from form to interpretation. In this second task, participants will first be given a sentence displaying a particular morphosyntactic device, either the subjunctive or the indicative, and then two different scenarios each of which provides a different context. If the association between morphosyntax and semantics has been acquired, the learners will activate a particular interpretation upon coming across the target morphosyntactic property, which will guide them in the acceptance of the appropriate context, or in rejecting a non-matching one (see also Montrul and Slabakova 2003). If the results obtained with these two tests differ significantly, in the sense that the results of the second task tend to be more target-like than those of the first task, it would confirm that our observations concerning the pertinence of the classical type of test are valid and opportune.

Let us now briefly describe the morpho-semantic phenomena whose acquisition is the target of our research: in Spanish, the choice of mood in relative clauses depends on the specificity of the DP head, and the interpretation of the head as specific or non-specific is heavily dependent on context, although certain purely syntactic factors such as the type of determiner are also involved. French has subjunctive relatives in practically the same contexts as Spanish. The question is whether L2 learners will be able to acquire the choice of mood in Spanish and also, as mentioned above, whether there will be a difference in their performance on interpretation-to-form versus form-to-interpretation.

2. Mood selection

2.1 Sentential arguments

The appearance of subjunctive morphology in complement clauses can be the result of two different mechanisms operating on mood. In the first, mood is lexically selected by some head and in such cases, there are no mood alternations. This is illustrated in (1):

- (1) Quiero que vengas /*vienes aquí.
 want that come.Subj come.Ind here
 ‘I want you to come here.’

Subjunctive can also be licensed by the presence of an operator such as negation or interrogation that takes under its scope a verb that normally selects indicative, as in (2); this is the second mechanism that licenses mood. It is not selection in this case but mood licensing a certain interpretation while on the scope of an operator. The phenomenon has been labeled *polarity subjunctive* in Stowell (1993) and subsequent work, and we use this terminology here. Examples of polarity subjunctive appear in (2).

- (2) No dijo que lo habías / hubieras hecho tú, Miguel.
 neg say that it had.Ind had.Subj done you, Miguel
 ‘(S)he didn’t say that you had done it, Miguel.’

Both moods are grammatical in polarity subjunctive; what changes is interpretation: indicative signals that the speaker presupposes the lower proposition, subjunctive indicates lack of presupposition.

2.2 Relative clauses

We also find modal distinctions in adverbial and relative clauses. Relative clauses, our concern here, pattern with polarity subjunctive in that grammaticality is not at stake; mood signals interpretation here too, as can be seen in (3).

- (3) El capitán que ha/ haya dado la orden tiene que ser juzgado.
 the captain that has.Ind has.Subj given the order has that be judged
 ‘The captain that has given the order must be judged.’

The two interpretations signaled by mood hinge on the referential properties of the DP modified by the relative: it is accepted that indicative correlates with specificity of the DP and subjunctive, with non-specificity (for fine grained discussions of the factors at work, see Farkas 1985; Giannakidou 1998; Kampers Manhe 1991; Pérez-Saldanya 2000; Quer 1998; Rivero 1971).¹ Therefore, in (3), the indicative signals that the speaker has a specific captain in mind; with the subjunctive the speaker indicates that (s)he knows that there is a captain that gave the order, but (s)he does not know who.

For our purposes here, we assume a scopal account of specificity. A DP is specific if the existential operator that quantifies over it has scope over other operators such as modals or negation and it is non-specific if it scopes under those very same operators. If we postulate an interpretable [+specific] feature, instantiated in D, and a Specificity (or presuppositional) Phrase in the left periphery, outside sentential operators, then we could say that the DP moves in order to check the [+specific] feature at LF, and in this way we get the right scope of the nominal with regards to modal, negative, intensional or any other operator. It follows from this that the crucial ingredient for licensing a specific or non-specific interpretation of a DP is context: if you have the right sort of operator, then you can license a non-specific interpretation of indefinites universally.

In (4)-(9) we show a representative sample of the contexts that are relevant for licensing non-specificity of the object: negation (4), interrogation (5), modals (6), future tense (7), imperatives (8), and strong intensional predicates (9).² In all of these examples, the relative clause appears in the subjunctive mood and the reading of the DP is, as expected, non-specific. Following the scopal hypothesis sketched above, the DP scopes under the relevant operator, Neg, +Wh, Modal, Fut or Irrealis, Imp, and Int being the likely operator candidates.

- (4) No veo un coche que me convenga.
neg see a car that me suits.Subj
'I don't see a car that suits me.'
- (5) ¿Ves un coche que te convenga?
see a car that you suits.Subj
'Do you see a car that suits you?'
- (6) Aquí puedes encontrar un coche que te convenga.
here can find a car that you suits.Subj
'Here you may find a car that suits you.'
- (7) Compraré un coche que me convenga.
buy.Fut a car that me suits.Subj
'I will buy a car that suits me.'
- (8) Compra un coche que te convenga!
buy.Imp a car that you suits.Subj
'Buy a car that suits you!'
- (9) Te sugiero que compres un coche que te convenga.
you suggest that buy.Subj a car that you suits.Subj
'I suggest that you buy a car that suits you.'

1. However, the correlation non-specific/subjunctive is not perfect. For instance, generic propositions are intensional and as such, they license non-specific readings of DPs. In Spanish, however, indicative relatives are obligatory in such contexts, as in (i) (see Borgonovo, Bruhn de Garavito & Prévost, in prep).

(i) Los andinistas que suben-Ind/*suban-Subj alto tienen problemas de oxígeno.

'Climbers who climb the Andes high have oxygen problems.'

2. We follow Farkas (1992) in naming this way verbs such as *need* or *want*.

The non-specific interpretation is ruled out in episodic, non-modalized environments, such as (10). In this case, and as expected, subjunctive is not acceptable and only indicative, concomitant with the specific reading imposed on the DP, is.

- (10) Ha llegado un coche que te conviene / *convenga.
has arrived a car that you suits.Ind suits.Subj
'A car that suits you has arrived.'

There are other, purely syntactic ingredients that can additionally appear to mark (non-)specificity, such as type of determiner (indefinites being more easily interpreted as non-specific than definite DPs), presence or absence of the preposition *a*, which marks specificity in animate direct objects and others. In our tests, we maintained our sentences constant in this respect (e.g. indefinite relative heads and no preposition *a*) in order to keep the task minimally simple.

French also shows mood alternation in relative clauses, but this alternation is more limited than in Spanish (see Soutet 2000). In particular, it does not obtain in a future context, as shown in (11).

- (11) J'achèterai une voiture qui me ??convienne / convient.
I will buy a car that me suits.Subj suits.Ind

In certain cases, such as sentences with modal verbs, many French speakers prefer the conditional with non-specific DPs over subjunctive, though prescriptively the phenomenon is similar in both languages. Spanish is more conservative than French in its use of subjunctive, French being further along the progressive loss of this mood (Poplack 1992; see also section 6).

3. L2 acquisition of modal contrasts

Modal contrasts in relative clauses should in principle be difficult to acquire precisely because grammaticality is not always at stake: in (3) and (4) through (9), both moods are grammatical, in contrast to (10). Since mood marks interpretation, the relevant evidence for acquiring the distinction is much harder to come by for the L2 learner. Subjunctive relatives are mentioned in L2 Spanish classes, but it is not at all clear that the explanations that are given are of much help. The typical statement is that 'mood distinguishes between existent and non-existent objects' and the example, often the only example, is *I'm looking for a secretary who speaks Polish*. Students are informed that the secretary in question exists if indicative is used and does not if subjunctive is. The whole range of contexts where specificity and non-specificity plays a role is not discussed.

Subjunctive in general is a hard area of grammar for L2 learners (see Collentine 1995, 2003). They have difficulties using the subjunctive in clausal complements of verbs of doubt, verbs of denial and verbs of emotion; relative clauses have also been claimed to be hard to acquire. Native speakers show variability of use of the subjunctive/indicative contrast in these very same contexts, the same contexts in which the contrast may not be acquired by early bilinguals and which may be the first lost in attrition. Subjunctive with volitional and directive predicates, on the other hand, is acquired more easily and shows greater stability in contact situations.

Yet, dependencies triggered by operators that result in differing interpretations can be acquired by L2 learners, as is suggested in Borgonovo and Prévost (2003), which looks at the L2 acquisition of polarity subjunctive. According to results from a truth value judgment task, the most advanced learners performed within the range of native speakers: they accepted subjunctive and rejected indicative with predicates that do not license subjunctive in their first language (L1).

The study presented in this article is in this same line, as it focuses on the acquisition of non-selected mood in relative clauses. One interesting aspect of the learning situation investigated here is that both the L1 and the L2 share similar properties (modulo the differences mentioned above) with respect to the phenomenon under scrutiny. Following Sorace, a certain degree of optionality should nevertheless be observed in the learners since the phenomenon is located at the interface between two modules. Optionality is indeed reported in situations where the targeted properties are found in both the L1 and L2, such as Bini's (1993) study on the acquisition of overt and null subjects by Italian-speaking learners of Spanish.

4. The study

4.1 The learners

Twenty-seven French-speaking learners and 19 native speakers (NSs) of Spanish took part in our study. The learners all reported having started learning Spanish as adults, at a mean age of 17:6. All learners were enrolled in Spanish courses at Laval University, Quebec, Canada. Their proficiency level was established via a multiple choice task (the reading/vocabulary section of the MLA Cooperative Foreign Language Test (Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ)) and a cloze test (from the Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera (Spanish Embassy, Washington, DC)). Based on the results of these tests, the learners were divided into two groups: an intermediate group (n=6) and an advanced group (n=21). As to the NSs of Spanish, their age ranged from 20 to 47 (mean: 31.5). These speakers came from various countries in Latin America, including Mexico, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Chile, and Peru. They were tested in the Quebec area and had at least an intermediate proficiency in French. Details on the participants are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' information

	Native speakers	Advanced learners	Intermediate learners
# of subjects	19	21	6
L1	Spanish	French	French
Age	31.5 (20-47)	26.8 (21-47)	25.2 (22-39)

4.2 Methodology

The participants were administered an appropriateness judgment task (AJT) and a sentence combination felicity task (SCFT), both focusing on mood selection. All participants first took a mood recognition task whose purpose was to make sure that they were able to distinguish the subjunctive and the indicative forms of the verbs involved in the two main tasks. The participants all passed this test without errors.

4.2.1 Appropriateness judgment task (AJT)

The AJT contained 36 scenarios (in the learners' L1) followed by two sentences in Spanish, one displaying a relative in the subjunctive, the other in the indicative. The scenarios were meant to establish the specific/non-specific status of the DP. The participants had to decide, for each sentence, whether or not it appropriately corresponded to the situation described in the scenario. Judgments were given on a 5-point scale (from -2 to +2). All sentences were grammatical in Spanish. Five context types were investigated, the ones in (4) through (9), except for negation.³ The examples in (12) and (13) illustrate strong intensional and interrogative contexts with appropriate indicative and subjunctive.

- (12) C'est l'anniversaire de Marisol. Ses amis ne savent pas quoi lui offrir et ils demandent donc à son petit ami. Ce dernier a vu une publicité pour un parfum à la télévision, et il sait qu'elle aimerait l'avoir. Il dit:

'It is Marisol's birthday. Her friends don't know what to get her, so they ask her boyfriend. He saw a perfume advertised on TV and he knows she wants it. He says:'

- a. Marisol quiere un perfume que anuncien en la televisión.
M. wants a perfume that announce.Subj on the television
- b. ✓ Marisol quiere un perfume que anuncian en la televisión.
M. wants a perfume that announce.Ind on the television

3. As explained below, mood alternation could not be tested in a negation context through the SCFT. We thus decided not to discuss the results on negation in the AJT so as to maintain optimal comparisons between the two tasks.

- (13) Je dois passer une semaine dans un hôtel, mais je ne peux pas laisser mon chien tout seul à la maison. Le problème, c'est que la plupart des hôtels interdisent les animaux domestiques dans les chambres. Je demande à un ami:
 'I must spend a week in a hotel, but I cannot leave my dog alone at home. The problem is that most hotels don't allow pets in the rooms. I ask a friend of mine:'
- a. ✓ ¿Conoces un hotel que acepte perros?
 know-2S a hotel that accept-Subj dogs
 - b. ¿Conoces un hotel que acepta perros?
 know-2S a hotel that accept-Ind dogs

Note that knowledge of mood was tested on the present forms of the indicative and the subjunctive; no past forms were used. Moreover, all relative heads were introduced by an indefinite determiner, since use of a definite article may have biased the learners in favor of the indicative. These two remarks also apply to the SCFT.

4.2.2 Sentence combination felicity task (SCFT)

In the combination task, participants were given pairs of sentences and were asked to judge how naturally the sentences combined. In each pair, the first sentence contained a relative clause in the subjunctive or the indicative; the second, a felicitous or non-felicitous continuation to the first, in that it either confirmed (i) or contradicted (ii) the specificity status as indicated by mood on the relative. In examples (14) and (15), the first sentence displays the subjunctive. In (14), the second sentence provides a non-specific context, so the combination is felicitous; in (15), the context provided by the second sentence is specific, which yields a non-felicitous combination.

- (14) ✓ Quiero un vuelo a Roma que haga una escala en París. Pero no puedo encontrar ninguno.
 'I want a flight to Rome that make-Subj a stop in Paris but I can't find any.'
- (15) * Buscamos un perro que tenga una sola oreja. Se llama Fido.
 'We're looking for a dog that has-Subj only one ear. His name is Fido.'

The same five sentence types were used as in the appropriateness judgment task. Negative sentences were not included, as it is extremely difficult to construct a relative head accompanied by an indefinite determiner in such sentences; a negative polarity quantifier such as *ninguno* would be highly preferable instead (e.g. *No tengo ninguna falda que combine con mi chaqueta nueva* 'I don't have any dress that combines with my new jacket'). There were 72 sentence pairs altogether, and the answers were asked to be provided on a 5-point scale.

5. Results

In this section, we present the results of the two tasks, each time starting with general results and then moving to more detailed results, distinguishing between non-specific and specific contexts. We focus mainly on the results of the NSs and the advanced learners groups, since they are comparable in size.

5.1 Appropriateness judgment task

5.1.1 AJT: General results

As can be seen in Table 2, the NSs and the advanced learners correctly selected the appropriate mood according to the context, specific or non-specific. Highly significant differences were found between appropriate and inappropriate moods in the NSs group and the advanced learner group on each context, specific and non-specific. No such differences were found with the intermediate learners. It can also be

observed that the advanced learners had a slight tendency to accept the indicative in non-specific contexts: they rejected it at -.298, compared to -1.172 for the NSs.

Table 2: General mean responses (AJT)

Context	Mood	Status	Natives (n=19)	Advanced (n=21)	Interm (n=6)
Specific	Ind	App	1.242****	1.6****	.4
	Subj	Inapp	-.512	-.692	-.011
Non-specific	Subj	App	1.832****	1.448****	.889
	Ind	Inapp	-1.172	-.298	-.656

Significant difference between appropriate and inappropriate mood (ANOVA): **** $p < .001$, *** $p < .001$

5.1.2 AJT: Detailed results by contexts

5.1.2.1 AJT: Non-specific contexts

Recall that in non-specific contexts, the appropriate mood is the subjunctive. As shown in Table 3, the NSs and the advanced learners showed highly significant distinctions between the two moods on each condition, except the future for the learners (in bold in Table 3). In this case, there is a strong L1 effect since the future is also the context where the subjunctive is less acceptable in French (recall (11)). Again, no significant differences between the two moods were obtained by the intermediates on any condition.

Table 3: Mean responses in non-specific contexts (AJT)

Condition	Mood	Status	Natives (n=19)	Advanced (n=21)	Interm (n=6)
Strong intensional	Subj	App	1.895****	1.683****	1.389
	Ind	Inapp	-1.175	-.651	-.944
Future	Subj	App	1.772****	1.222	.833
	Ind	Inapp	-1.246	.063	-.333
Interrogatives	Subj	App	1.789****	1.397****	1.222
	Ind	Inapp	-.825	-.349	-1.722
Imperatives	Subj	App	1.86****	1.571****	.833
	Ind	Inapp	-1.211	-.349	-.333
Modals	Subj	App	1.842****	1.365****	.167
	Ind	Inapp	-1.404	-.206	.056

Significant difference between appropriate and inappropriate mood (ANOVA): **** $p < .001$, *** $p < .001$

5.1.2.2 AJT: Specific contexts

Table 4: Mean responses in specific contexts (AJT)

Condition	Mood	Status	Natives (n=19)	Advanced (n=21)	Interm (n=6)
Strong intensional	Ind	App	1.579****	1.524****	.056
	Subj	Inapp	-1.333	-.857	.278
Future	Ind	App	1.947****	1.81****	.389
	Subj	Inapp	-.947	-.921	-.222
Interrogatives	Ind	App	.561	1.841****	.611
	Subj	Inapp	.228	-1.111	-.444
Imperatives	Ind	App	.965**	1.571****	.667
	Subj	Inapp	-.281	-.571	-.167
Modals	Ind	App	1.158**	1.254**	.278
	Subj	Inapp	-.228	0	.5

Significant difference between appropriate and inappropriate mood (ANOVA): **** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$

The results on specific contexts, where the appropriate mood is the indicative, are reported in Table 4. As can be seen, the NSs made the expected distinctions in four out of five conditions. They had problems with interrogatives (in bold in Table 4), for which both moods were accepted to a roughly similar extent. The reason for this behaviour is not immediately clear and will be discussed in section 6. In contrast to the NSs, the advanced learners obtained significantly higher scores on the indicative in all conditions, including interrogatives. They also selected the appropriate mood in the Future condition, which was not the case when the context was non-specific (recall Table 3). No significant differences were registered for the intermediate learners.

5.2 Sentence combination felicity task

5.2.1 SCFT: General results

We now turn to the SCFT, starting with the general results displayed in Table 5. As can be seen, the performance of the NSs and the advanced learners is almost identical, insofar as target-like distinctions are made between appropriate and inappropriate mood in the relevant contexts. There is also a slight tendency, on the part of both groups, to accept the indicative in non-specific contexts since the indicative was not rejected to a very large extent. In particular, it was not as strongly rejected as the subjunctive in specific contexts. Finally, as seen throughout the results reported so far, the intermediate learners did not display any significant differences in either context.

Table 5: General mean responses (SCFT)

Context	Mood	Status	Natives (n=19)	Advanced (n=21)	Interm (n=6)
Specific	Ind	App	1.363****	1.312****	.972
	Subj	Inapp	-.55	-.765	.343
Non-specific	Subj	App	1.325****	1.116****	.657
	Ind	Inapp	-.117	-.161	.537

Significant difference between appropriate and inappropriate mood (ANOVA): **** p<.001, *** p<.001

5.2.2 SCFT: Detailed results by contexts

5.2.2.1 SCFT: Non-specific contexts

Table 6: Mean responses in non-specific contexts (SCFT)

Condition	Mood	Status	Natives (n=19)	Advanced (n=21)	Interm (n=6)
Strong intensional	Subj	App	1.088*	1.19**	.556
	Ind	Inapp	.035	-.286	1.056
Future	Subj	App	1.123****	1.127**	.389
	Ind	Inapp	-.368	-.127	.056
Interrogatives	Subj	App	1.404**	1.032****	.722
	Ind	Inapp	.07	-.508	.556
Imperatives	Subj	App	1.105****	.825*	.444
	Ind	Inapp	-.316	-.032	-.167
Modals	Subj	App	1.526****	1.397****	1.111
	Ind	Inapp	-.474	-.175	.944

Significant difference between appropriate and inappropriate mood (ANOVA): **** p<.001, *** p<.001, ** p<.01, *p<.05

The detailed results of the SCFT on non-specific contexts are reported in Table 6. There, it can be seen that the NSs and the advanced learners made statistically significant distinctions between the two moods on each of the five conditions. This includes the future condition for the learners. Recall that this is where they had failed to make the target distinction in the previous task. This confirms the

hypothesis whereby results should be more target-like on the SCFT (a form-to-interpretation task) than on the AJT (an interpretation-to-form task). Note that the intermediate learners consistently failed to make significant distinctions between the two moods.

5.2.2.2 SCFT: Specific contexts

In non-specific contexts (Table 7), the NSs and the advanced learners made the expected distinctions in all conditions. The results are particularly interesting in the case of the NSs who had failed to significantly distinguish between the two moods in the Interrogatives condition in the ACT (in specific contexts). Here again, we see a difference between the two tasks which favors the interpretation side of the equation. Table 7 also displays much stronger differences between the two moods than in the previous table. This shows that the NSs and the advanced learners found it easier to reject the subjunctive when inappropriate – in specific contexts (Table 7) – than to reject the indicative in specific ones (Table 6).

Table 7: Mean responses in specific contexts (SCFT)

Condition	Mood	Status	Natives (n=19)	Advanced (n=21)	Interm (n=6)
Strong intensional	Ind	App	1.456****	1.429****	1.5
	Subj	Inapp	-.86	-.794	.167
Future	Ind	App	1.649****	1.492****	1.444
	Subj	Inapp	-.561	-.905	.056
Interrogatives	Ind	App	1.175****	1.095****	.889
	Subj	Inapp	-.421	-.857	.111
Imperatives	Ind	App	1.123****	.889***	1
	Subj	Inapp	-.807	-.873	.111
Modals	Ind	App	1.07****	1.222****	-.056
	Subj	Inapp	-.263	-.81	1.111

Significant difference between appropriate and inappropriate mood (ANOVA): **** $p < .001$, *** $p < .001$

6. Discussion and conclusion

In the AJT, we saw that two conditions yielded no significant difference between the subjunctive and the indicative: interrogatives with appropriate indicative in NSs (so, in specific contexts), and future tense with appropriate subjunctive in the advanced learners (so, in non-specific contexts). In contrast, in the SCFT, significant differences were found between the two moods on all conditions, including those that showed no significant differences in the other task. In addition, there is a very strong parallel between the results of the native speakers and those of the advanced learners in the SCFT: significant differences between the two moods, and a certain resistance to strongly reject the indicative in non-specific contexts.

The results on the SCFT show that the correct interpretation is there in advanced learners (and, of course, in NSs): upon seeing the mood marker, the right interpretation is primed. The AJT, with its weaker results, suggests that something is interfering with an interpretation that we know is there, thanks to the combination test, presumably processing. This in turn suggests that the learners' grammatical representation is not deficient (contra Meisel 1997). In future research investigating the acquisition of phenomena at the morphosyntax/semantics interface, we thus strongly urge researchers to contemplate the recourse to less traditional methodologies, in particular techniques targeting the form-to-interpretation direction.

As pointed out earlier, there is a strong parallel between the results of the NSs and those of the advanced learners: not only do they manage to make highly significant distinctions between the two moods, they also display similar difficulties in rejecting the indicative in non-specific contexts. This kind of parallel is similar to what is reported in other research investigating the interface between semantics and morphosyntax in L2 acquisition (e.g. Borgonovo and Prévost 2003; Dekydtspotter et al.

1999/2000). It suggests that native-like grammars may be reached in L2 acquisition (in accordance with Birdsong 1992 and White and Genesee 1996, among others, and contra Bley-Vroman 1990) even in areas deemed to be vulnerable or inherently difficult (Sorace 2003, 2004).

As a whole, the subjunctive is easier to reject than the indicative when inappropriate in the SCFT. This may be due to the markedness value of the indicative and the subjunctive. Several authors, among them Leonetti (1999), claim that subjunctive is univocally linked to non-specificity but indicative, the unmarked member of the pair, is not necessarily linked to the opposite interpretation. There is no agreement with respect to this, but such a view might explain the robustness of the first correlation (that between non-referentiality and subjunctive) in our experiment, in contrast to the relative weakness of the second (that between referentiality and indicative). In any case, it has been observed (by Horn (1989) and others) that whenever we have such an opposition, the unmarked member of the pair tends to take on the meanings not signaled by the marked member, as a purely pragmatic move. For this reason, antecedents of indicative relatives tend to be interpreted as specific. This (strong) tendency explains some of our results, in which the correlation between indicative and specificity is much higher than would be expected if indicative were absolutely indifferent to the interpretation of the DP, but still not as strong as that between subjunctive and non-specificity, which is dictated by semantics and not by pragmatics. The combination test allows us to see that subjunctive, the marked mood, immediately triggers the right semantic interpretation – no existential presupposition – thus making rejection of inappropriate subjunctive an easier task. It also shows that the link between subjunctive and non-specificity is there, encoded in the IL grammar.

It may be argued that the native-like results of our advanced learners are due to the fact that both French, like Spanish, has indicative and subjunctive. However, this cannot be the whole story. First of all, as said earlier, French is much less conservative than Spanish in its use of the subjunctive. This is confirmed by the results on an AJT inspired from ours that tested the intuitions of French native speakers on the subjunctive in French (Boudreau 2006). Boudreau reports that the indicative was preferred over the subjunctive in almost all the non-specific conditions investigated. In total, the indicative was selected in 69% of the non-specific contexts, compared to 29% for the subjunctive. This suggests that the target-like results obtained by our advanced learners in non-specific contexts in Spanish should not be considered to be strongly influenced by L1 properties.⁴ Boudreau also found that the French NSs accepted the indicative in specific contexts significantly more often than the subjunctive (89% versus 11%). However, such a clear trend was not observed in our intermediate learners of Spanish. We saw that these learners did not make any statistically significant distinctions between the two moods on any condition in any context, including specific contexts. If anything these results point toward vulnerability and optionality, or temporary optionality. However, we should point out that only six intermediate learners participated in our study, which prevents us from making any strong claims as to the acquisition of mood in the early stages. Clearly more learners should be tested. In addition, learners with a different L1 (one that has no subjunctive marking, such as English) should also be involved and tested via both tasks. It would be interesting to compare their pattern of responses to those of the French-speaking learners.

To conclude, we agree with Sorace that some areas of knowledge may lead to some degree of optionality, but it should also be strongly pointed out that optionality can be overcome, to the point where the intuitions of NSs and L2 learners become quite similar. It could also be the case that interface phenomena may not be equal with respect to optionality or difficulty of acquisition, with syntax-pragmatics phenomena yielding more optionality than syntax-semantics ones (see Tsimpli and Sorace 2006). Finally, when investigating areas that may be fertile grounds for optionality, it is crucial to examine whether or not some degree of optionality also obtains in NSs – NSs of the L2, naturally, but also NSs of the L1.

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4. This would need to be confirmed by administering a French version of both of our tests to NSs of French.

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Selected Proceedings of the 10th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium

edited by Joyce Bruhn de Garavito
and Elena Valenzuela

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2008

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Selected Proceedings of the 10th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium
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Borgonovo, Claudia, Joyce Bruhn de Garavito, and Philippe Prévost. 2008. Methodological Issues in the L2 Acquisition of a Syntax/Semantics Phenomenon: How to Assess L2 Knowledge of Mood in Spanish Relative Clauses. In *Selected Proceedings of the 10th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium*, ed. Joyce Bruhn de Garavito and Elena Valenzuela, 13-24. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

or:

Borgonovo, Claudia, Joyce Bruhn de Garavito, and Philippe Prévost. 2008. Methodological Issues in the L2 Acquisition of a Syntax/Semantics Phenomenon: How to Assess L2 Knowledge of Mood in Spanish Relative Clauses. In *Selected Proceedings of the 10th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium*, ed. Joyce Bruhn de Garavito and Elena Valenzuela, 13-24. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. www.lingref.com, document #1782.