Reassembling features in phenomena with different complexity: gender and tense/aspect in Spanish as L2 and heritage language

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Despite the large body of research in the field of Second Language (L2) and heritage language (HL) acquisition, it is still unclear why L2 learners and heritage speakers (HS) exhibit variability. Different proposals from full availability of UG (e.g., White 2003) to its complete inaccessibility after a certain maturational stage (e.g. Clahsen & Muysken 1986) have been put forward for L2 learners. For HL, proposals reach from incomplete acquisition due to reduced input and age effects (Montrul, 2002, 2008) to complete acquisition of qualitatively different input (Pires & Rothman 2009; Pascual y Cabo & Rothman 2012). A promising proposal for L2 acquisition is found in Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere 2009) stating that a full acquisition of the target system is generally possible, but difficulties can occur during the process of feature reorganization. Putnam and Sánchez (2013) propose a similar model for HS and connect difficulties to the reassembly of L2 functional features onto L1 lexical items triggered by decreased activation of certain feature values in the HL.

This paper applies these approaches to our findings in Spanish as HL or L2, comparing four groups: (1) 15 Anglophone learners of L2 Spanish, (2) 15 German learners of L2 Spanish, (3) 15 HS in the USA and (4) 15 HS in Germany. Furthermore, we included 15 native speakers of Spanish as a control group. By means of oral interviews, a written production task and a Grammatical Judgment Task (24 items for each phenomenon), we compared their performance in two grammatical domains with cross-linguistical differences: first, gender assignment to nominal phrases and second, the contrast between Preterit and Imperfect which involves grammatical aspect (Zagona 2007). Whereas Spanish has a two-gender system and German has a three-gender system (Eichler et al. 2012), English only marks 3rd person pronouns for gender (Corbett 1991). Spanish requires a consistent marking of perfectivity in the past tense; in English grammatical aspect is relevant for the progressive (Salaberry & Ayoun 2005). German does not mark grammatical aspect at all (Heinold 2015). These differences have been reported to cause severe acquisition difficulties (Comajoan 2014). Our goal is to show that a feature reassembly is an arduous process not guaranteed to be completed if started late.

Based on statistical analyses, we find evidence for complete acquisition in the case of HS who, especially in the domain of tense-aspect, clearly outperform the L2 learners. Regarding gender agreement, both L2 learner groups show application of learning strategies: German learners produce gender violations mainly in the gender of nouns ending in -e, whereas English learners produce gender violations due to overgeneralization of gender regularities in non-canonical nouns. Overall, German-speaking L2 learners outperform the Anglophone group. The aspect data shows more severe difficulties: the English L2 group relies on lexical aspect, the German L2 group on temporal markers. Both groups are far from native accuracy. In contrast, in the HS data we find neither a target-deviant convergence of lexical and grammatical aspect, nor an unexpected concentration of non-grammatical elements. The HS groups differ only slightly in terms of their accuracy rates, which led to no significant differences. We thus conclude that feature differences are less significant than the age of onset. Attested differences between the groups will be discussed in the light of the role of input, language activation and language combination. HS's performance is in flux based on their activation of Spanish and Age of Acquisition.

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