

Tense and aspect in naturalistic L2 Acquisition

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INTRODUCTION

«She walks, she is walking, she walked». In English, theoretically, almost every verbal inflection can occur in connection with every verb. However, L1 speech data of various languages reveal that verbal inflections are actually not evenly distributed across different verbs, but rather occur mainly with specific aspectual verb categories. Numerous acquisitional studies on both L1 and L2 acquisition show an even stronger tendency for the use of emerging verb inflections in such a restricted way (L1 studies include Bronckart, Sinclair 1973, Antinucci, Miller 1976, Bloom et al. 1980). For L2 acquisition this learner behaviour has been formulated as the *aspect hypothesis* (Andersen, Shirai 1994) and tested in various L2 combinations (Robison 1995, Bardovi-Harlig, Reynolds 1995, Bardovi-Harlig, Bergström 1996, Rohde 1996, 1997). The *aspect hypothesis* states that verb inflections initially encode lexical or verb inherent aspect rather than temporal distinctions or grammatical aspect.

Vendler's aspectual verb categories and the aspect hypothesis

The lexical aspect categorization used in this study as well as in most other recent studies is based on Vendler's four-class pattern (Vendler 1967, Dowty 1979). Verbs are classified according to two pairs of semantic features (\pm duration, \pm telicity), thus yielding four verb or predicate classes: states (+durative, -telic: be, want, love), achievements (-durative, +telic: touch, win, catch), accomplishments (+durative, +telic: write a book, run 10 miles, grow up), activities (+durative, -telic: write, run, sleep). The examples suggest that the domain of lexical aspect is not the isolated verb, but rather the entire predicate.

For both the L1 and L2 acquisition of English the prediction is that in the early stages past marking is mostly restricted to verbs expressing an event of short duration (-durative) often including a visible change-of-state or the aim of the action (+telic), thus achievements like *broke, fell, smashed*. At the same time, the ING-inflection is strongly affiliated with activities expressing extended duration without any change-of-state (-telic): *walking, sleeping, reading*.

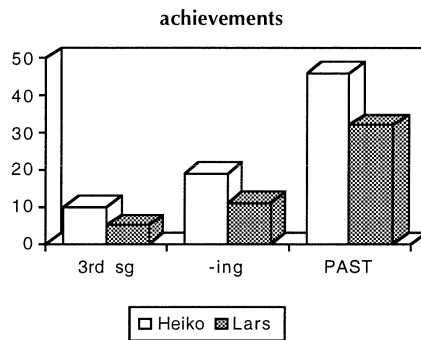
The data and procedure

Naturalistic L2 data of two German children (Heiko and Lars) provide the data base for the present study. The data were collected in 1975 during a six-month stay in California when Lars was six and Heiko nine years old. The spontaneous speech was written down and tape-recorded on a day-to-day basis so that every day of the stay was covered (for more details see Wode 1981, Rohde 1997). Each inflected verb was categorized according to Vendler's classification system,

thus identifying verbs as achievements, accomplishments, activities or states. Temporal location of inflected and uninflected verbs was analyzed with the help of contextual information provided in the diary data or inferred – if possible – from the respective context in the tape recordings.

In general, the results seem to support the aspect hypothesis: Verbs inflected for past are mainly achievement verbs and numerous activity verbs are marked for progressive. However, the use of the progressive, i.e. the -ING-inflection across verb categories poses a problem. Below the focus will be on the use of the progressive from two different vantagepoints. In Fig. 1 all the inflected achievement verbs (types) are given for the two boys. Whereas the affiliation of the progressive form with activity verbs follows the prediction of the aspect hypothesis, there are quite a few achievement verbs that occur with the progressive form:

Fig.1 – The occurrence of achievements (number in types) with three verb inflections for the two German children



This is surprising as achievements denote punctual events and the progressive form usually requires verbs that refer to some temporal extension. It is the use of the progressive form with future reference which accounts for the unexpected distribution in utterances such as «Now I'm jumping to right there», «I'm coming down in a minute», «I'm catching one», «I'm not giving all of mine» etc. This function of the progressive has been ignored in studies testing the aspect hypothesis so far. It may have been deemed marginal as input data suggest that the predominant function of the progressive form is to mark ongoing events. In Fig. 2 and 3 the format is changed and the -ING-inflection in the course of the boys' L2 exposure is chosen as the vantagepoint. This format reveals that for Lars, the future function of the progressive is even more important than any other function during the first part of the stay and for Heiko, the use of -ING-inflected verbs with future reference is stable throughout the six-month-stay.

Fig. 2 – The -ING-suffix and its occurrence with the four verb categories – Lars

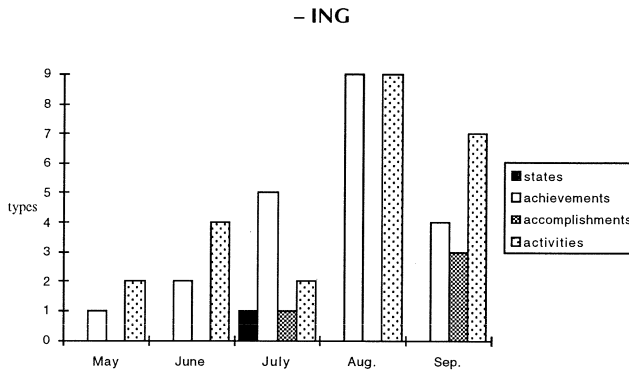
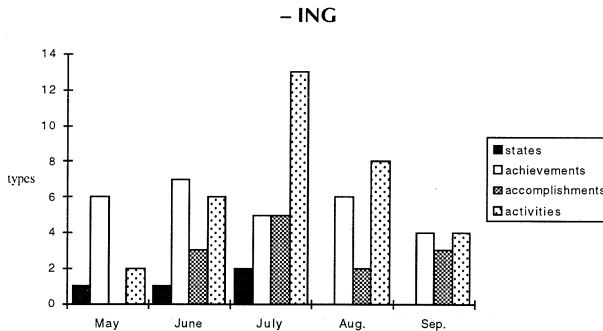


Fig. 3 – The -ing-suffix and its occurrence with the four verb categories – Heiko



Discussion of the results

The analysis of aspectual verb classes in connection with verbal inflections seems to support the aspect hypothesis. Punctual/telic verbs (achievements) are mainly associated with the (regular and irregular) PAST-inflection, durative/atelic verbs (activities) are affiliated with the -ING-inflection. Robison suggests that «it could be that the aspectual categories approximate cognitive universals. That is, learners link emerging inflections to internal aspectual categories, which are more salient than tense distinctions» (Robison 1995, 364). However, there are a number of problems with the claims and the interpretation of the hypothesis.

As shown, one major problem is the use of -ING and the acquisition of progressive aspect. Even though it was found in the seventies that the -ING-inflection occurred as the first element before the PAST-morpheme in L2 data (Dulay, Burt 1974), this does not say anything about the degree to which the target-like functions of -ING are actually mastered by the learner.

There is another problem concerning the uninflected verb forms in the data. If the aspect hypothesis were correct, there should be more uninflected activity verbs than achievements in past contexts. This is not the case. There are more uninflected achievement verbs than both activities and accomplishments. How can this be accounted for? I would like to suggest that this is in fact a matter of a distributional bias: There are simply more achievement verbs than

states in the data. This skewed distribution is also reflected by the uninflected verb forms. As long as the children have not acquired a generalizable rule for past-marking there are a lot of verb forms that remain uninflected – irrespective of the aspectual verb category.

The L2 tense hypothesis

The aspect hypothesis is not supported by our L2 data. It is questionable whether L2 learners in the early stages of acquisition link internal aspectual categories with verb inflections. It is true that there is a skewed distribution of verb categories, but the children's use of inflected verbs clearly supports the salience of tense distinctions.

In opposition to the aspect hypothesis, the L2-tense hypothesis is proposed. It is assumed that the L2 learner (unlike the L1 learner) looks for tense distinctions in the language she/he is learning and as long as a past vs. non-past distinction is transparent, will acquire these temporal features before any grammatically aspectual distinctions (see Buczowska, Weist 1991) and without encoding lexical aspect first.

The tense hypothesis makes the following predictions for the early stages of L2 acquisition irrespective of age:

- The learnability of verb inflections is granted through a distributional bias of verb categories in the input.
- Grammatically aspectual forms are interpreted by the L2 learner as temporal distinctions (e.g. the progressive form in this study is used with present, future and past reference without necessarily encoding progressive aspect).
- The learner's L1 seems to be irrelevant for this development – even if aspect is grammatically encoded and morphologically transparent like Polish (see Buczowska, Weist 1991, Dietrich et al. 1995).

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