

Interpreting Ellipsis in L2 Spanish

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L1-L2 similarity has been found to be a predictor of successful L2 acquisition in a number of domains (cf. Foucart & Frenck-Mestre, 2011; Sabourin & Haverkort, 2003; & Sabourin & Stowe, 2008, for processing; Olsen, 2012, for phonetic similarity; among others). However, competing evidence from the processing literature suggests that L2 learners do not parse like native speakers of their L1 or L2 (Roberts et al., 2003; Papadopoulou & Clahsen, 2003), but rather parse in a manner that is “shallow” (for an overview of the Shallow Parsing Hypothesis, see Clahsen & Felser, 2006). The current study examines the effects of L1 similarity and proficiency level on the acquisition of nominal ellipsis in L2 Spanish by L1 English speakers. Specifically, we look at the following contrast:

1. a. Compré una cartera italiana de cuero y otra *e* de lona. (*e* = cartera italiana)
I bought an Italian purse (made) of leather and another e (made) of canvas.
- b. Me dio un libro grande de Borges y otro *e* de Cortázar (*e*= libro; *e*≠ libro grande)
He/She gave me a big book by Borges and another e by Cortázar.

In Spanish, relational adjectives such as *italiana* (1a) form part of the gap; they are interpreted together with the elided N. This contrast, however, does not hold for qualifying adjectives (1b) (Kornfeld, 2010; Demonte, 1999). English patterns with Spanish in terms of these judgments. As such, we seek to establish whether L1 similarity will result in successful L2 interpretation of this elliptical construction. Alternatively, if L1 similarity is not a predictor, we expect that L2 speakers will not distinguish between relational and qualifying adjectives when establishing the relationship between filler and gap.

We report preliminary results of a Truth Value Judgment Task (TVJT) administered using the psycholinguistic software Superlab 5.0.4. 31 L1 English-L2 Spanish speakers read sentences where the elided material constituted a noun modified by a relational adjective (1a), and sentences where only the noun formed part of the gap (1b); they were then asked a comprehension question to determine their interpretation of the elided material (2a) and (2b), respectively.

2. a. ¿Es italiana la cartera de lona?
Is the canvas purse Italian?
- b. ¿Es grande el libro de Cortázar?
Is the book by Cortázar big?

Truth value judgments indicate that, overall, L1 English-L2 Spanish speakers interpret this elliptical construction like native speakers; mean differences in the number of affirmative responses in the relational ($M=2.03$) versus the qualifying ($M=1.54$) adjective condition is highly significant; $t(30) = -5.3033$, $p < 0.001$). However, analysis by proficiency level suggests that advanced speakers ($n=10$) are driving this effect; they are the only group providing significantly more affirmative responses to items in the relational adjective condition than to items in the qualifying adjective condition (Mann Whitney $U=12.25$ $n_1=n_2=10$, $p < .005$ two tailed). The results of the beginner and intermediate participants are compatible with shallow parsing accounts; they suggest that the syntactic representations available to L2 speakers during comprehension are not influenced by L1-L2 similarity. Advanced speaker convergence, alternatively, suggests that proficiency may influence outcomes.

References

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