

Features and forms in L2 Spanish verbal inflection

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1. Introduction. In L2 Spanish, errors in person and number agreement are commonly observed in verbal morphology. Two potential sources of these errors have been proposed: syntactic deficits (Vainikka & Young-Scholten 1994, 1996) and mismatches at the syntax-morphology interface (Lardiere 1998a,b; Prévost & White 2000). Those in the syntax camp argue that such errors stem from a lack of functional projections in the initial stages of acquisition, while those in the morphology camp argue that L2 speakers have the relevant functional projections but realize these structures in a divergent manner (i.e., the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis). MSIH-related approaches are promising but do not always make specific predictions with respect to the systematicity of errors.

2. Background. McCarthy (2006, 2012) addresses this deficiency, finding that L2 errors mainly involve the substitution of forms for underspecified, or default, values for more marked values: 3P for 1P, SG for PL, and non-finite for finite. In contrast, errors involving feature clash (**yo habla-s* 'I speak-PRS.2SG') are rare. McCarthy (2012) shows that the overproduction of 3P forms, such as *habl-ó* 'speak-PST.3SG' for *habl-é* 'speak-PST.1SG', is not restricted to tokens that consist of infinitival forms minus final *-r* (*habla* 'speak-PRS.3SG' as *habla-r* 'speak-INF'). These results challenge Bruhn de Garavito's (2003a,b) proposal that 3P errors are non-finite forms (i.e., the verbal stem). However, McCarthy's analysis lacks a clear stance on its approach to portmanteau and null morphemes (e.g., whether *habla* 'speak-PRS.3SG' is an unanalyzable whole or can be segmented as *habla-Ø* 'speak-PRS.3SG'). Furthermore, it is not clear whether L2 errors are better characterized in terms of default values (3P, SG, present, etc.) or default forms (\emptyset in *habla-Ø*).

3. Design. This study develops the morphological account by exploring the interaction between feature specification and properties of vocabulary items. In particular, we consider the following factors: 1) overt versus null morphemes, 2) the length of produced forms versus target forms, and 3) the exponence of tense and agreement (i.e., separative versus portmanteau). Importantly, we analyze substitutions related to person and tense in tandem rather than in isolation. Our data consist of 2,194 verbal tokens extracted from the SPLLOC 2 corpus produced by 20 intermediate L2 speakers of Spanish (Mitchell et al. 2008). Each token was manually coded for mood, tense, person, and number and compared with target forms coded for these same features. Target forms were tabulated and compared with the produced forms.

4. Results. In total, there were 842 errors, and preliminary results confirm that the rate of errors for 1P forms was higher than for 3P forms (22% and 10%, respectively). Of these errors, substitution of 3P forms for 1P forms was the most common error type (56% of 1P targets, or 92 of 165 errors), supporting McCarthy's (2006, 2012) underspecification account. Interestingly, there are interactions between person and tense: underspecified present-tense forms were substituted in preterite and imperfect contexts in 32% of the underspecified 3P-for-1P substitutions (29 of 92 errors), as in *mira* 'look.3SG.PRS' for *mir-é* 'look-1SG.PST'. The final key finding was that the rate of substitution of 3P for 1P was unaffected by its expression as an overt (*habl-ó* 'speak-PST.3SG') versus null morph (*habla-Ø* 'speak-PRS-3SG').

5. Conclusion. Our results indicate that morphophonological exponence is not a predictor of L2 errors, providing a new dimension of support for the underspecification hypothesis. Namely, error frequency is similar for overt and null underspecified forms, as revealed by the distinction between default feature values (3P, SG, present, etc.) and default vocabulary items (\emptyset in *habla-Ø*). This research suggests that L2 errors are not cases of omission; instead, the nexus of learners' difficulties appears to be the morphological component, before lexical insertion.

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