

Expressing Tense and Aspect: The Case of Adult Chinese-Spanish Bilinguals in Ecuador

Hsiao-Ping Biehl
La Salle University

The acquisition of Spanish past tense morphology can be difficult for adult speakers of Chinese, a tenseless language. Chinese does not mark tense through morphological inflections like Spanish and English do. Chinese language refers to time lexically through nouns, adverbs, and adverbial phrases. In addition, the perception of aspect in Chinese also seems to differ from languages like Spanish and English where importance is placed more on the temporality of a situation rather than on its shape. In order to test whether adult Chinese speakers of Spanish acquire L2 tense-aspect morphology, I take into account Andersen's Lexical Aspect Hypothesis (LAH). Andersen created developmental stages of tense morphology acquisition in relation to lexical aspectual classes of verbs. By taking into account Andersen's LAH and the target language learners' L1 linguistic system, this study will show how the Chinese older adults acquire tense meanings before their morphological forms. The adults in this study use alternate forms to the past such as gerunds, past participles, infinitives or the present tense. In addition, the frequency of occurrence of certain verb forms, especially the third person singular present is attributed to their emergent grammar, which in many ways is quite different from Spanish.

The data for this study was collected during the summers of 2001-2003 by interviewing eight adult Chinese immigrants, 5 females and 3 males. The length of each interview varied per individual. In addition to a Goldvarb analysis, selected sentences were analyzed in detail.

The analysis shows that when applicable, speakers use Spanish past participles in 22/122 cases to indicate specific, bound events as it is expressed in Chinese with the perfective aspect marker *-le*. The use of gerunds in 17/122 cases indicates the imperfective aspect of an event as it is expressed in Chinese with durative aspect markers *-zài* or *-zhe*, and in 18/122 cases the

infinitive form is used instead of a past tense form. The most prevalent tendency is the use of the present tense form in 61 of 122 cases of incorrect past tense usage.

The tense morphology acquired by the Chinese adults does not seem to surpass the third stage of Andersen's eight developmental stages. The acquisition of tense meanings before their morphological forms also reinforces the influence of Chinese linguistic system (tenseless) over the emergent grammatical system.

References

- Clements, C. (2005). Immigrant speech, Creoles, and the 'basic variety': a usage-based account of some traits in the Portuguese-based creoles. *Journal of Portuguese Linguistics*, 4, 149-165.
- - - (2003a). On Classifying Language-Contact Varieties. In *Selected Proceedings of the First Workshop on Spanish Sociolinguistics*, ed. Lofti Sayahi, 1-10. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.
- - - (2003b). The Tense-Aspect System in Pidgins and Naturalistically Learned L2. *SSLA*, 25, 245-281.
- Hinkel, E. (1993). L2 Tense and Time Reference. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26, 557-572.
- Montrul, S. and Salaberry, R. (2003). The Development of Tense-Aspect Morphology in Spanish as a Second Language. In B. Lafford & R. Salaberry. (Ed.), *Spanish Second Language Acquisition* (pp.47-73). Washington: Georgetown U. Press.