Encoding complex events in advanced English L2 productions: the role of aspect in the expression of simultaneity

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Abstract

This study explores the use of the progressive form to encode simultaneous events in oral narratives by advanced and very advanced Catalan and French learners of English as a foreign language. On the basis 84 narratives, we analyse the progressive/non-progressive aspectual contrast and the array of semantic, discourse and cross-linguistic factors which shape the use of verb morphology in simultaneity scenes in L2 English. The results indicate that learners tend to encode abundant viewpoint information, whereas English native speakers provide less viewpoint information and rely instead on other semantic and syntactic devices to encode simultaneity. Only the very advanced learners have grasped the optionality of the progressive form in the expression of simultaneity in English. This seems to indicate that the ultimate challenge for proficient learners remains to uncover the implications the choice of a given verb form can have on the overall construction of meaning.

Keywords: progressive form, tense-aspect morphology, advanced learners, EFL, simultaneity

1. Introduction

1.2. The temporal relation of simultaneity: definition and linguistic expression in English L1

Simultaneity has generally been analysed in the wider context of the expression of temporality in narrative discourse, both in first (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition (Aksu-Koç and von Stutterheim 1994; Schmiedtová 2004; Leclercq 2007). Numerous studies in psycholinguistics have shown that the expression of temporal relations is conditioned by the grammaticalised devices available in a given language and is closely related to certain conceptualisation principles which appear to be language specific (von Stutterheim and Lambert 2005; von Stutterheim and Carroll 2006; Carroll and Lambert 2006, among others). The study of simultaneity, in
particular, has provided some interesting insights into the information selection processes underlying, for instance, the use of tense-aspect morphology or of temporal adverbials and conjunctions in native and learner narratives.

It is important to distinguish between extra-linguistic simultaneity (i.e., what is perceived as simultaneous in the extra-linguistic world) and linguistic simultaneity (i.e., what is encoded as simultaneous). This distinction is relevant for at least two reasons. Firstly, in discourse, a relation of simultaneity can be established between events which do not overlap in the extra-linguistic world. According to Aksu-Koç and von Stutterheim (1994: 397), two events, processes, or states, are considered to be simultaneous if they share “a value on the time axis”. This value does not need to be the actual event time (ET) but a more subjective standpoint, the reference time (RT), from which the speaker presents a temporally anterior event as still relevant at the time of a later event. In example (1), the knocking down of the hive (1c) necessarily precedes the start of the bees’ chasing the dog (1b) but the use of the present perfect establishes a temporal continuum between the two events as part of a cause-effect construct:

(1)  
a. at this point - an owl - pops out of the hole in the tree  
b. and - a bunch of bees start following the dog -  
c. probably angry that the dog has knocked their hive out of the tree.

Secondly, the distinction between extra-linguistic and linguistic simultaneity is relevant because a speaker may choose not to encode two simultaneous events as such. This is common in L2 productions because learners struggle with accessing target language structures in an online task and often prune the scenes to their plot-advancing elements without reference to other protagonists in the scene. Compare, for instance, example (2) below, produced by an adult Catalan learner of English, with example (3), produced by an adult English native speaker as part of the same narrative task. The density of events per scene is higher in the English L1 example (4 events) than in the English L2 one (2 events):

(2)  
a. they meet many other animals such as bees #  
b. but the frog was not there yet #.  
c. the boy looks for the # frog  
d. # but he couldn't find it. (English L2)

(3)  
a. the boy tumbles down from the branch  
b. because of an owl who’s popped from a hole.  
c. and the dog runs howling by  
d. with this swarm of bees chasing him. (English L1)