The Acquisition of the Subjunctive in Spanish as a Third Language

Cross-linguistic influence in the acquisition of a third language is a field of research which is still in its beginnings. In fact, it is the differences between the acquisition of a second language and the acquisition of a third language regarding language interference, and the important implications that these studies have for language acquisition theories in general, which have motivated research in this domain (Cenoz, Hufeisen et Jessner 2001). According to Odlin (1989), typological distance is a factor which affects transfer. Although similarity between languages can grant some important advantages for a learner, it can also create special problems. For example, the subjunctive is a mood which is often used in French and Spanish, but not always in the same contexts:

- Il est probable que nous allons (INDICATIVE) à Paris.
- Es probable que vayamos (SUBJUNCTIVE) a Paris.
- ‘It is probable that we are going to Paris.’

Since the subjunctive barely exists in English, this mood is difficult for Anglophones to master and therefore numerous studies exist on the acquisition of the subjunctive in French and in Spanish (e.g. Collentine 2003, Clark 1985). Given that the majority of these studies only take into account interactions between the first (L1) and second language (L2) of the learner, the main purpose of this talk is to examine the relations between the L1 and L2, and between the L2 and L3, of a speaker. However, since native speakers do not always follow the prescriptive grammar rules of their language themselves, I also discuss 1) the degree of variation of the usage of the subjunctive between different varieties of Spanish in relation to the norm (e.g. Steel 1976) and 2) the degree of variation of the usage of the subjunctive between different varieties of French in relation to the norm (e.g. Poplack 1992).

In order to obtain data to analyze, I conduct a pilot study using three small groups of university language students: Anglophones who have learned French as a second language and Spanish as a third, native Spanish speakers, and native French speakers. Each participant from the first group is asked to complete the following four tasks: 1) a questionnaire to obtain their linguistic profile (ex.: age, sex, languages spoken, etc.); 2) a placement test to determine their skill levels in Spanish and French; 3) an aural test to see if they are able to spontaneously identify grammatical and ungrammatical sentences in Spanish and French; and 4) a written multiple choice test to evaluate their use of the subjunctive in these two Romance languages. The two control groups complete the same tasks, but only in their first languages.

My preliminary hypothesis is that Anglophones who have a strong base in French make fewer errors when using the subjunctive in Spanish than those who are weaker in their second language due to positive transfer. However, in cases where the French and the Spanish subjunctive differ, I expect to find negative interference and confusion.

This research is useful not only because it helps to expand the field of third language acquisition on a morphosyntactic level, but also because it allows us to obtain new knowledge on the variable nature of subjunctive usage that may benefit future students studying Spanish and French as foreign languages at the university level.
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References:


