

Spanish Tense-Aspect and Mood Morphology in L2 Learners and Heritage Speakers: Are There Differences?

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The acquisition of the aspectual difference between the preterite and imperfect in the past and the acquisition of the subjunctive/indicative contrast are classic problem areas in L2 acquisition of Spanish by English-speaking learners (Montrul & Salaberry 1997; Montrul & Slabakova 2003). Similarly, Spanish heritage speakers in the U.S, who I consider incomplete L1 learners, exhibit simplification of the preterite/imperfect contrast and incomplete acquisition/attrition of subjunctive morphology and its semantics in specific contexts (Silva-Corvalán 1994, Montrul 2002, Montrul 2007). But do L2 learners and heritage speakers have similar difficulties, or are heritage speakers better than L2 learners in these domains? If heritage speakers acquired Spanish as L1 early in life, albeit incompletely, while L2 learners acquire Spanish as a second language as adults, it is possible that heritage speakers have retained a great deal of this knowledge, especially when they continue to use Spanish in their daily lives to some extent. But if classroom instruction matters for the acquisition of these forms, then L2 learners may hold the advantage.

I will present results from a large scale study of 72 L2 learners and 69 heritage speakers of different levels of written proficiency in Spanish. All participants completed 6 tasks (3 for tense-aspect and 3 for mood), testing oral production, morphological recognition and semantic interpretations of aspect and mood morphology in Spanish. The results show that L2 learners and heritage speakers make errors with tense-aspect and mood morphology, but there are differences between the two groups, especially by proficiency levels: while low proficiency heritage speakers have advantages over L2 learners, at the advanced level the L2 learners surpass the heritage speakers with knowledge of the subjunctive. There are also differences by tasks. As found in related research with nominal agreement (Montrul, Foote & Perpiñán, in press), heritage speakers do better than the L2 learners in oral tasks and in written tasks that minimize metalinguistic knowledge. I will discuss the theoretical implications of these findings for theories of language acquisition and loss as well as the pedagogical implications for the classroom.