COMPREHENDING AND SPEAKING ABOUT MOTION IN L2 SPANISH

A Case of Implicit Learning in Anglophones

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For my son and Loreto.

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Introduction

1.1 The Purpose of This Book

This book reports on an investigation into the learning of motion-event descriptions among adult Anglophone learners of Spanish as a foreign language (L2 Spanish by convention) at three levels of proficiency: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. The book will motivate language instructors to entertain a broader perspective on the teaching and learning of Spanish, since motion conflation does not show among the typical teachable contents of traditional Spanish programmes. Evidence suggests that the learning analysed in this book is usually a case of implicit learning rather than explicit teacher instruction.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that motion is a universal concept inextricably associated with human kinaesthetic experience (Cadierno, 2004), yet we talk in language-specific ways about how animate or inanimate entities change location (Talmy, 1985, 2000). Thus, for Anglophone speakers to sound idiomatically accurate in L2 Spanish, they need to learn the lexico-syntactic constructions with which the target-language community naturally talks about motion.

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Drawing on Leonard Talmy's (1985, 1991, 2000) typological classification, researchers have described the ways languages from different families lexicalize motion and co-event (manner or cause), motion and path, and motion and figure. English and Spanish have been the source of numerous studies as they purportedly belong to two different typologies. English belongs to the group of so-called *satellite-framed* languages (S-languages) and Spanish is one of the *verb-framed* languages (V-languages). Evidence suggests that even though the two languages overlap in some lexicalization patterns, their main trends differ. Briefly, when speakers talk about translational motion events (i.e., events that involve an entity changing location from Point 1 to Point 2), Anglophones and Hispanophones tend to describe a different aspect of that event.

According to the typological classification, there is a high probability that Anglophone speakers will describe an event that involves a human entity in displacement in terms such as *A man ran out of the building.* Conversely, to refer to that same motion event, Hispanophones will most likely say *El hombre salió del edificio* 'the man went out of the building.' At first sight, these two statements convey roughly the same idea: the entity (the man) is no longer in the building (the source point). Some might even argue that the statements function as possible translations of each other. Yet closer inspection reveals that the statements do indeed differ in terms of what they communicate. The source of this subtle but substantive semantic difference lies in the type of verb root.

In the case of the English statement, speakers prefer *manner* verbs (e.g., *run, crawl, grab*), which emphasize the internal mechanics of motion, the rate of motion, and even the attitude of the entity involved in the motion event (Slobin, 1997, 2000). Hispanophones prefer instead to talk about things that move in the world by lexicalizing the *path* in the main verb (e.g., *ir* 'go', *salir* 'go out', *subir* 'ascend'). This means that speakers' descriptions focus on the trajectory followed by an entity with respect to the source (e.g., *del edificio* 'of the building'), the medium, and the goal that the entity aims to reach (Cadierno & Ruiz, 2006; Talmy, 1985, 2000). If the discourse context requires that Hispanophones add information about the manner in which the motion takes place, they prefer to convey it in postverbal constructions (e.g., *el hombre salió corriendo* 'the man went out running') that may be elided due to discourse

factors (see Chap. 2 for a detailed presentation of the S-language and V-language typologies). Some scholars have accounted for these semantic variations in terms of the training we receive from our first language that predisposes us to think (i.e., perform mental processes) for communicating, either linguistically or by gesturing, in language-specific ways (Kita & Özyürek, 2003; McNeill & Duncan, 2000; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Slobin, 1996, 2000).

In order to test the assumption that crosslinguistic differences may lead to the perception of different aspects of a motion event, researchers have designed tasks in which speakers have been asked to look at a wide range of dynamic and static animate and inanimate objects. Experimental tasks have elicited participants' oral and written motion-event descriptions produced in non-narrative as well as narrative tasks. Most of these studies have investigated the tendencies of reception and production of motion events in monolingual speakers. Fewer studies have considered bilinguals' comprehension and production of motion events, especially for L2 learners at three distinct proficiency levels and measured under the same experimental conditions (for a detailed review of research on Talmy's typological classification, see Cadierno, 2008, pp. 247–266).

For the study reported in this book, all three groups of Spanish learners completed a forced-choice meaning-judgement task. This receptive task tested learners' sensitivity to the preferred motion conflation in written Spanish. In addition, the learners orally narrated the stories of two short, silent excerpts of a Pink Panther cartoon. This task was designed to test how learners spoke about motion events within the context of the two stories. Learners completed these tasks in both first-language (L1) English and L2 Spanish, and linguistic tendencies were subsequently compared with those of a native Spanish-speaking group. The ultimate goal of the study was to determine when and how, over the course of studying Spanish, the Anglophone speakers demonstrated comprehension and spontaneous production of the preferred motion-conflation pattern of the Romance language.

Our current understanding of how Anglophone speakers progress from first-language preference for the manner of motion to the Spanish preference for the path of motion remains limited. Equally insufficient is our understanding of the effect that learning to verbalize motion in a second

language may have on the way bilingual speakers mentally represent the concept, or the extent to which a new form of mental representation indicates some kind of reconceptualization (Pavlenko, 2000). For this reason, the study reported in this book sheds new light on a topic that remains underresearched. Of particular interest for Spanish instructors is the fact that the evidence collected came from students learning Spanish in a traditional classroom environment. Therefore, learners' exposure to L2 Spanish input was by and large mediated by pedagogical motivations, as I explain below.

1.2 Spanish in the Second-Language Classroom

In Canada, the location of this study, a classroom is the primary context for learning L2 Spanish. Access to authentic sources of Spanish input in non-academic settings varies greatly depending on the size of the immigrant Hispanic community living in the area. Spanish language teachers (and teachers of other languages as well) would agree about the positive effects of language instruction, at all levels of education (Doughty, 2003; Long, 1983, 1988). Furthermore, advances in technology and communication have opened up the possibility for language learners to complement the L2 input they receive from language teachers by reading or listening as well as responding to or interacting with information available in various electronic forms (Gonglewski, 1999; Logan, 2000; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2000; Warschauer, 1995).

Watching and listening to native Spanish speakers interacting with or reading materials in the target language offer learners rich L2 input with all sorts of idioms, expressions, and linguistic subtleties. This is the case of learners participating in online one-on-one language exchanges (i.e., *teletandem*), who enjoy the atypical opportunity of dialoguing with native speakers in real time (Navarro, 2013, Navarro & Contreras, Submitted; Telles & Vasallos, 2006; Vasallos & Telles, 2006). These non-guided conversations appear to be more beneficial when learners have already achieved some knowledge of the second language. This is because in non-guided exposure to L2 input, learners may receive linguistic material

for which they are not yet developmentally prepared (Krashen, 1985; Pienemann, 1989); therefore, the input becomes incomprehensible and is only perceived as "noise" (Krashen, 1982; Long, 1983, 1996).

By contrast, the Spanish language classroom can appear to be a safe environment because exposure to the linguistic input is, for the most part, assessed and monitored in order to ensure comprehension of the new language's grammatical properties (R. Ellis, 1981, p. 74). This has led some to conclude that explicit learning, a conscious learning process associated with direct teacher instruction, is more advantageous than the unconscious learning process of implicit L2 learning (Doughty, 2003; Norris & Ortega, 2000). Yet, as I will explain, implicit learning is an inescapable reality of language instruction, and Spanish is no exception.

In the context of this book, L2 input should be understood as any example of a non-native language, oral or written, that a learner receives within or beyond an instructional environment where there is emphasis to meaning and learners exercise comprehension (B. VanPatten, personal communication, July 17, 2015). With respect to the concept of motion, in subsequent chapters I discuss the fact that this is a recurrent notion in the Spanish language classroom; therefore, learners should witness multiple occurrences of the target-language input. For instance, many instructors adhere to teaching methods that involve students changing location within the classroom to respond to a command (e.g., Asher's [1969, 2000] Total Physical Response; Maxwell's [2001] Accelerated Integrative Method), while others have students move around as part of an activity (e.g., a game or role-play), and/or incorporate motion to explain the meaning of actions, such as swimming, that have a strong physical component (Duffelmeyer, 1980; Saltz & Donnenwerth-Nolan, 1981).

What is critical in all these situations that involve processing L2 Spanish input containing motion-event descriptions is that Anglophone learners hear, speak, read, and write linguistic samples that contrast with what they conventionally comprehend and produce in L1 English. Earlier I mentioned that for speaking about their own movement or that of another entity, Anglophone speakers prefer to talk in terms of the *walking, crawling,* or *gliding* performed (i.e., the manner of motion). Yet, in the L2 Spanish context, in the classroom or elsewhere, Anglophone learners perceive that Hispanophones rarely use all such descriptive

manner verbs, and simply hear that an entity *sube* 'goes up' or *baja* 'goes down' somewhere. That is, the speaker only attends to the fact that the entity being described no longer remains at some original source point; instead, the entity relocates to a new position by going in some direction. Whether the change of location happens in the form of a walking, crawling, or another manner verb event, the Anglophone learner of Spanish may refrain from verbalizing it because it is not conventionally required in the L2 language.

This is, in fact, the foundation of a crosslinguistic difference between English and Spanish, and a source of challenges in L2 language learning. Simply put, Anglophone learners are preconditioned by L1 English to be more cognizant of features of their world such as motion events that are explicitly and recurrently encoded in English-specific ways (i.e., the manner of motion). Thus, conditioning by the L1 may interfere with the learning of subsequent languages (Littlemore, 2009). Notice that the issue here is not that English lacks path verbs because it certainly has a vocabulary of verbs such as *come, enter, leave,* and many others. The language simply favours manner conflation in spontaneous discourse (Talmy, 1985, 1991, 2000). As a result, Anglophone learners are likely less aware of the features that the additional language stresses (Littlemore, 2009).

At this point the Spanish language instructor reading this book might wonder whether the students in her class talk about motion events using the correct Spanish lexicalization pattern. Moreover, the instructor may be wondering about the frequency with which she has to correct her students' ill-formed motion constructions. As I will show later in the book, the verbalization of the concept of motion does not lead to unintelligibility in L2 Spanish. Motion conflation does not trigger the same semantic inaccuracy as does the use of false cognates that often lead L2 Spanish users into difficulties. A typical example is that of Anglophones who use the word *embarazada* 'pregnant' when referring to someone who actually felt embarrassed! Near convergence of the pronunciation of these two words makes them ideal candidates for students to also assume the existence of a semantic correspondence. But nothing of this sort could happen when an Anglophone talks about motion events in L2 Spanish. And this is actually good and bad for the learner.

It is good if we consider that whether or not the learner construes her message using path of motion (the preferred motion-conflation pattern in Spanish), her sentence may still be comprehensible, all things being equal. Let us imagine that during an activity, Anglophone learners have to talk about a movie clip to practise oral Spanish. One of the characters is a male figure who performs a series of motion events within the context of the storyline. Figure 1.1 shows a scene in which a male figure appears in transit towards a goal.

As well as anticipating differences in lexical and morphosyntactic accuracy and complexity, I can predict that Anglophone learners will also

Fig. 1.1 Figure in motion to reach a goal

vary in terms of the semantic information they want to communicate. Consider the following examples.

(1) *El hombre va para su casa* 'the man goes to his home.'
(2) *El hombre camina para su casa* 'the man walks to his home.'

In line with what I have explained above, however much statement (2) is semantically and syntactically well formed, it would seldom be uttered in spontaneous native Spanish discourse. The sentence simply does not conform to the central tendency of what Hispanophones say when talking about people or things moving in time and space. The sentence seems instead a calque of an English motion-event description, with a manner conflation verb as the main predicate.

But regardless of whether the learner produces sentence (1) or (2), intelligibility is not affected in this case. Both sentences convey that the man is in transition to reach his goal. Unlike the confusion between the false cognates I pointed out above (or any other morphosyntactic error, for that matter), the substitution of path or manner verbs cannot be labelled "wrong"; it is simply unidiomatic. Using a manner verb rather than a path verb when talking about motion events is just not what Hispanophones naturally do. Hence, if a proficient Spanish speaker heard statement (2), she would quickly perceive that the sentence sounds somewhat *odd.* The speaker might not even be fully cognizant of the reasons for her disapproval, but she would intuitively know that things are not said that way in Spanish.

Several questions arise at this point. How can learners cultivate awareness of this aspect of the target language to which their first language has conditioned them to be less sensitive? And in the absence of explicit teacher instruction, how do they end up learning to speak about motion events in L2 Spanish? Is the input they receive in class from the instructor sufficient to acquire this subtle aspect of the target language? Do they require additional language sources in order to accomplish this learning task? If so, where can these resources be found?

I doubt that Spanish teachers would object to the idea that within the classroom the primary source of input is the teacher. Likewise, we would all agree that the way we talk to our students in the Spanish class

is a pale reflection of how we interact in non-pedagogical situations. The reason is simple: as teachers, we adjust our speech to assure intelligibility when interacting with our students in class (R. Ellis, 1994a). The outcome of this speech adjustment is the so-called *teacher talk,* more a pedagogically adequate style for addressing students than it is an example of authentic Spanish language (Chaudron, 1985, 1988; R. Ellis, 1994a; Parker & Chaudron, 1987; Wong-Fillmore, 1985).

Two additional sources of input are the teaching materials and interaction between the learners themselves. Suffice it to say that in an instructional context, much like in child language, the learning process also advances as students attempt to decode L2 input for meaning before elaborating a response. Thus, it is indeed feasible that learners can develop networks of knowledge from which an interlanguage develops in their minds, and progress will be directly mediated by the amount and consistency of the L2 Spanish input they receive.

From the demographic information collected in the study reported here, a few participants mentioned some use of Spanish in non-instructional environments. Likewise, most advanced learners reported that they had had exposure to the target language in native-speaking contexts. This suggests that these learners could be aware of authentic Spanish phrasing but might still be unable to apply this knowledge productively. Most beginner and intermediate learners, in any case, overwhelmingly identified the classroom as the main source of contact with Spanish. In what follows, I briefly focus attention on the relationship of explicit to implicit learning as it unfolds in an instructional environment. I provide concrete examples that will help the reader appreciate the effect that the L2 Spanish input could have on the empirical evidence reported in Chaps. 6 and 7 of this book.

1.3 Explicit and Implicit Knowledge in L2 Spanish Language Learning

Traditionally, explicit and implicit knowledge are defined as the outcome of two learning processes whose defining characteristics are the presence or absence respectively of awareness at the time of receiving and processing

input (DeKeyser, 2003; R. Ellis, 1994a, 1994b; Krashen, 1994; Schmidt, 1994a, 1994b; Sharwood Smith, 1994; Williams, 1999). In this sense, the two forms of knowledge are directly related to the nature of the associated learning processes (Hulstijn, 2005). While explicit knowledge is acquired when the learner appears to be conscious of being exposed to aspects of the target language, implicit knowledge is acquired despite the learner being presumably unconscious of the fact that she might be learning something new (see comment on *noticing* below).

An instructor's teaching approach plays a major role in terms of how learners come into contact with the target language. For instance, Spanish instructors whose pedagogical approach adheres to what Lightbown and Spada (2015, p. 154) define as *Get it right from the beginning* treat the language as an object of study (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Seliger, 1976). That is, they parse and label the language's structures using metalinguistic terminology (e.g., preterit, verb root). At the same time, they prefer instructional materials that focus attention on the *formal* (i.e., morphosyntax) aspects of Spanish. As a result, learners gain various levels of proficiency to describe and apply formal properties of Spanish (e.g., verb paradigms, use of clitics). Learners apply this explicit knowledge, about which they can even formulate and test hypotheses, as they search for structures (N. Ellis, 1994a, 1994b; R. Ellis, 1994b; Hulstijn, 2005).

This kind of awareness of what is known about the target language becomes evident in the following protocol reported by Navarro (2015). The reflection comes from an undergraduate student who facilitated Spanish practice to a group of high school students. In response to the question of whether he liked Spanish more after the community project in which he participated, the undergraduate replied: *Yes. Because I realize how many words and grammar concepts I actually know pretty well and how diverse the language is* (#6, M, 22).

Two points need to be mentioned to put this statement into perspective. First, the undergraduate student and his peers were all learners of Spanish at the time of the community project. Second, they all prepared activities using the language content the high school students were studying at that time. This means that the undergraduates needed to review that content to plan suitable activities. This presents the possibility that the undergraduate learners verified the extent to which they were prepared

to plan such activities. Therefore, what the protocol reflects is an introspective analysis that learner #6, M, 22 performed on his own interlanguage, which most likely happened more than once over the course of the project. The learner shows consciousness of having lexical and grammatical L2 Spanish knowledge that he must have kept in analysed form; hence he was able to quantify it and assess his own command of it.

Equally important, in the protocol the learner acknowledged that he still had more to learn about the diversity of the Spanish language. The latter is in line with R. Ellis's (1995, p. 89) proposal that explicit L2 knowledge "helps learners notice linguistic properties of the input they might otherwise not notice". One possibility is that in preparing activities for his high school peers, student #6, M, 22 reviewed his knowledge of the vocabulary required to talk about a familiar topic such as means of transportation. While reviewing the Spanish equivalent for, say, the word *bus*, the learner discerned that people call it *micro* in Chile, but *camión* in México, and *guagua* in the Spanish Caribbean (Wigdorsky, 2005, p. 185). Pertinent to such review and preparation is R. Ellis's (1995) suggestion that we, language users, might thus come to realize there are aspects of the target language we are unaware of when manipulating known information. Reviewing the names of means of transportation, for example, could bring into our awareness the existence of synonyms that otherwise would have remained unnoticed. In the case of the study reported in this book, it is possible that explicit instruction on aspects of Spanish morphology (e.g., verb paradigms, subject-verb morphological agreement) could have an effect on what learners "discover" about semantic aspects of the new language.

In particular, in order to speak about the motion event in Fig. 1.1, learners might be primarily interested in coordinating the correct form of the verb *va* 'goes' to the subject *el hombre* 'the man'. They might still notice that it is the verb *ir* 'go' rather than the more semantically descriptive verb *caminar* 'walk' that they are coordinating. In other words, the possibility remains that learners may also compare and contrast these verbal forms for the amount and kind of semantic information they convey. This study will show that experience using Spanish may play a substantial role, and that advanced learners more than beginners appear to profit from performing this kind of linguistic analysis.