

The acquisition of Italian Tense-Aspect morphology:
toward a native-like strategy

1. *Introduction*¹

The study reported in this paper is part of a larger project named “Osservatorio”, conceived and supported by Università per Stranieri di Perugia (Italy), with the principal aim of collecting data of Instructed Italian as a Second Language from a variety of first language backgrounds.

For the present study, we opted to specifically investigate the interplay between Aspect and Actionality in verb morphology during Second Language Acquisition (SLA), which is known as *Aspect Hypothesis*, AH, Andersen and Shirai (1994). AH claims that perfective inflection is initially used to mark telic verbal predicates, whereas imperfective inflection is restricted to atelic VPs: this form-meaning association challenges scholars of both First (FLA) and Second Language Acquisition processes, as we will further discuss in 2.2.

The study presented here aims to:

1. look for correlations between Aspect and Actionality during the process of Instructed Italian as a Second Language (AH, Distributional Pattern);
2. formulate a plausible pattern of spreading of Aspect inflections through semantic classes in the course of SLA, using a cross-sectional analysis (AH, Developmental Pattern);
3. compare learners and native speakers data (Distributional Bias Hypothesis, DBH).

There is still much disagreement in this field at both the level of description and explanation. Specifically, this paper aims to contribute to the current debate empirically addressing the DBH, as it has been recently suggested by different scholars, Dressler (2005). This paper has been basically conceived as a pilot study, to test the methodology and the theoretical hypotheses. Further study and a larger data-based are needed to reach stronger conclusions.

The paper is organized as it follows: theoretical background (2.1; 2.2); methodology (3); results (4); discussion (5) and conclusions (6).

¹ This research was presented at the Georgetown University Round Table 2005, “Educating for advanced foreign language capacities: construct, curriculum, instruction, assessment”, held in Washington, D.C., 10-13th march 2005. Fabiana Rosi wrote the paragraphs 2.2, 3.2, 5, 6; Jessica Cancila wrote the paragraphs 1, 2.1, 3.1, 4. The data have been gathered and analysed from both authors: J.C. collected data from learners at Georgetown University and F.R. from learners at Università per Stranieri of Perugia and Italian native speakers.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Aspect and Actionality

As Bertinetto and Delfitto (2000) point out, there are numerous terminological idiosyncrasies in the field of Aspect and Actionality. In the present paper, we will adopt their proposal to refer to Aspect as to «the specific perspective adopted by the speaker/writer» on the event and to Actionality as to «the type of event», a mostly semantic category, «essentially rooted in the lexicon». Temporal reference is «the localization of the event with respect to the speech point» (BERTINETTO and DELFITTO, 2000: 190; BERTINETTO, 1997: 27), while tenses are indeed the grammatical devices used by the languages to express «specific morphological coalescences (among Aspect and Temporal reference, ndr.), which have developed in each particular language» (BERTINETTO and DELFITTO, 2000: 191); for the Italian Tenses, cfr. Bertinetto (1991); Banfi and Bernini (2003)².

Aspect is mainly divided in perfective or imperfective, according to the definitions of Comrie (1976). To illustrate their main meanings, perfective and imperfective are used in the following sentences, respectively, to «wrap up an event into an air-tight package» or to describe an event as a «paint brush attempting to capture the internal movement as it is happening» (ANDERSEN, 1991: 309).

Ex. 1. Perfective: *Nessuno ballò* (3S *Passato Remoto*) *bene come lui*
Nobody danced as well as he did

Ex. 2. Imperfective: *Nessuno ballava* (3S *Imperfetto*) *bene come lui*
Nobody danced (was dancing/used to dance)
as well as he did (was)³.

Due to the limits of the present paper, we refer to Bertinetto (1997; chap. 5 and 8, respectively) for a typological analysis and for a comparative description of English and Italian Tense-Aspect systems. Shortly, Italian Tense-Aspect system codifies the contrast between perfective and imperfective functions by means of different grammatical tenses (*Passato Prossimo* or *Passato Remoto* for the former; *Imperfetto* for the latter), whereas the English past tense forms relies on context to express aspectual meanings.

The use of Aspect, as it appears in the preceding examples, represents the endpoint of acquisition: it is what adult native speakers do with Aspect,

² For a critical description and review of these classical definitions see KLEIN (1994).

³ Examples inspired by Spanish examples in ANDERSEN (1991: 309).

Andersen (1991: 309). We will see in 2.2 the intriguing patterns of Aspect morphology use in case of both First Language Acquisition and Second Language Acquisition from an English background.

The notion of Actionality attempts to capture the type of event described by the lexical entry of the predicate. Depending on inherent features of the events, different classes of predicates have been isolated, cfr. Table 1; cfr. Vendler (1967); Andersen and Shirai (1996). However, a caution is necessary: temporal adverbs, or even the global context, are often required to understand and classify verbal predicates, cfr. Bertinetto (1986); Andersen (1991: 311). In Table 1, a semantic-features analysis of Actionality classes of predicates, proposed by Comrie (1976), has been included. According to Andersen and Shirai (1996), Achievement predicates are those which take place instantaneously, and are reducible to a single point in time; Accomplishment predicates have some duration but with an inherent endpoint; Activity predicates have duration with an arbitrary endpoint, indeed State predicates are not dynamic and lack of a culminating endpoint.

	State (ST)	Activity (ACT)	Accomplishment (ACC)	Achievement (ACH)
Dynamic	-	+	+	+
Telic	-	-	+	+
Punctual	-	-	-	+
Examples	<i>To like</i>	<i>To run</i>	<i>To run two miles</i>	<i>To recognize</i>

Table 1

Actionality classes and semantic-features analysis.

2.2. Theoretical Background: Aspect Hypothesis

Given the interlinguistic – and even contextual – variability of the interplay between Aspect and Actionality, how do children acquire it? How do adult learners of a second language initially produce it? Which stages of acquisitional development do they go through? What is the actual native speakers' use of Aspect in correlation with Actionality?

Studies on non-instructed SLA of Italian, Giacalone Ramat and Banfi (1990), Bernini (1990), Giacalone Ramat (1995a), (1995b), (2002), Banfi and Bernini (2003), single out three different stages of the Italian Tense-Aspect system acquisition, as illustrated in Tab. 2.

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Present or Infinitive	Present	Present
	Perfective Past (with Telic predicates)	Perfective Past (with Telic predicates)
		Imperfective Past (with Atelic predicates)

Table 2

Forms produced at different SLA stages.

In the first stage learners can produce only the unmarked verbal form (*Presente* or *Infinito*), that encodes lexical information. In the second stage it emerges the aspectual distinction between the present form, that fulfils the imperfective functions, and the perfective past form (*Passato Prossimo* or *Passato Remoto*), that codifies the state resulting from a completed event, rather than a past event. At the third stage, also temporal dimension is acquired by learners, so that the present form is used to indicate present events, whereas the perfective past form begins to be used for past events. In this stage, learners acquire to distinguish perfective and imperfective past events and start using the imperfective past form (*Imperfetto*).

A further characteristic of this acquisitional process is the interplay between Aspect and Actionality. This interplay has been recognized since the first researches on Tense-Aspect morphology acquisition, see Bronckart and Sinclair (1973); Antinucci and Miller (1976). These studies have focused on FLA and have noted that children initially produce Tense-Aspect inflections as markers of Actionality, i.e. perfective inflection tends to be associated with telic predicates, while imperfective with atelic predicates, irrespectively of aspectual context of the sentence. This claim, especially its strongest version, has been criticized by Weist, that named it Defective Tense Hypothesis, DTH, Weist (1984). Subsequent studies from different areas as Creole Linguistics, Bickerton (1981), First Language Attrition, Bayley (1999) and SLA, Andersen (1991), Andersen and Shirai (1994), Bardovi-Harlig (1992), (2000), Salaberry and Shirai (2002), support a moderate interpretation of the DTH, named Aspect Hypothesis (AH).

According to AH, the systematic pattern of lexical diffusion has been interpreted according to the notion of Prototype. Moving from a classical Aristotelian classification, Rosch (1973) has proposed a fuzzy definition of category membership, according to which the members of every category do not share a certain number of traits, but indeed gradually resemble a prototypical member. In the specific case, the associations between semantically most con-

gruent values of Aspect and of Actionality have been defined prototypical, whereas the other associations represent more peripheral instances. Starting from prototypical associations, the aspectual markers are supposed to be spread to peripheral interactions, along the following patterns:

- a. Perfective Aspect: Achievement>Accomplishment>Activity>State
- b. Imperfective Aspect⁴: State>Activity>Accomplishment>Achievement

At the end of the acquisition process, as a corollary of the AH, learners are expected to use both Aspect inflections as markers of Tense-Aspect functions, irrespectively of the actional values of the predicates. AH proposes other explanatory claims for the acquisitional pattern, as discussed in §5.

A complementary account, the Distributional Bias Hypothesis, DBH, Andersen and Shirai (1996), suggests that the observed distributional biases of Tense-Aspect morphology can be found in the input which learners receive from native speakers. The account is addressed in the present study by comparing the written production of adult second language learners and native speakers.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants to the present study have been selected among Italian-language classrooms at Università per Stranieri, Perugia (Italy) and at the Italian Department, Georgetown University, Washington D.C. The sample includes 24 adult English native speakers learners of Italian as a Second Language. The three classrooms are presented below:

Intermediate level (I; 12 students; Georgetown University);
pre-Advanced (pA; 5 students; Università per Stranieri di Perugia);
Advanced (A; 7 students; Università per Stranieri di Perugia).

A control group of 12 adult Native Italian Speakers (NIS), was also tested. In Tab.3, sociolinguistic data are sinoptically shown.

3.2. Procedure

The corpus is part of a broader data collection, Rosi (2004), that consists of both oral and written data, discussed in Rosi (2006, in press a, b) and partially

⁴ As an example, the first occurrences of imperfective past are represented by the verb 'essere' (to be), the prototypical State. Then, learners start to associate imperfective morphology also with Activity, and, when the acquisitional process come to the end, with telic and punctual predicates as well, BANFI and BERNINI (2003).

	I	pA	A	NIS
Number of Subjects	12	5	7	12
Gender	F (7); M (5)	F (3); M (2)	F (3); M (4)	F (9); M (3)
Age (average and range)	20.25 (range: 19-24)	28 (range: 21-45)	27 (range: 21-40)	23 (range: 22-24)
Years of education (average and range)	17.25 (range: 16.19)	16 (range: 15-18)	17 (range: 15-18)	18 (range: 17-19)
Months of Italian SLA (average and range)	-	13.75 (range: 7-36)	48 (range: 72-12)	31.3 (range: 84-9)

Table 3

Sociolinguistic data.

available on website of University of Foreigners of Perugia (http://elearning.unistrapg.it/osservatorio/dati_rosi/). In this paper we focus on written data, elicited by means of a fill-in-the-blank task carried out by a double sample of learners of Italian L2, in Italy and abroad (see 3.1).

The task has required participants to insert in predetermined contexts the more appropriate past forms of the predicate proposed in brackets. The task consists of two short stories, inspired to two grammatical exercises about English Past tenses of a textbook for advanced learners of English as Second Language, Vince (1994: 24, 18)⁵. Every Actionality class is represented, but at different rates: to avoid any further effect for this bias, analyses have been conducted in percentage terms, as further illustrated (cfr. §4). This type of completion task has enabled us to verify if learners select Tense-Aspect morphology because of the aspectual contexts or because of the actional value of the predicate. Indeed, the task is formulated in order to propose to learners both contexts where Aspect-Actionality associations are prototypical, as in ex.3, or context with non-prototypical associations, as in example 4⁶. In the former, the telic predicate ‘organizzare’ (to organize) is more naturally associated with imperfective Aspect because of the unbounded and habitual interpretation of the event, suggested by the temporal adverb ‘spesso’ (often) and the iterative meaning of the event determined by the undefined plural object. In the latter the same predicate is more naturally associated with perfective Aspect, the most congruent Aspect with this telic predicate, because of the bounded perspective of the event of organizing the journey, that has to be concluded before the subsequent event of leaving to Italy.

⁵ The fill-in-the-blank task is reported in Appendix.

⁶ Examples below are completed by a translation that was not presented in the original task.

Ex. 3. *Spesso noi ... [organizzare] delle cene divertenti.*

Often we ... [organize] entertaining dinners.

EXPECTED ANSWER: ORGANIZZAVAMO (WE USED TO ORGANIZE)

Ex. 4. *Prima di partire per l'Italia, noi ... [organizzare] tutto il viaggio.*

Translation: Before leaving to Italy, we..... [organize] the whole journey.

EXPECTED ANSWER: ABBIAMO ORGANIZZATO (WE ORGANIZED)

In such a way, the task analysis provides information on which linguistic elements are relevant for the selection of Tense-Aspect morphology beyond the Actionality value, i.e. temporal adverbs.

Since the task has been given to both Italian native-speakers and learners of Italian as L2, the data allow a direct comparison between learners and natives production, who are interpreted as control group for the definition of aspectual perspective of contexts. Indeed, the most frequent aspectual interpretation of the native sample has been considered the target-like form. This methodology aims to consider the DBH, as specifically suggested by Andersen and Shirai (1996) and Dressler (2005).

4. Results

The analysis is basically a within-category one, Bardovi-Harlig (2002), in that it asks how do learners mark each of the Actionality classes. The results are analysed both in terms of a distributional analysis, the distribution of verbal inflections among Actionality categories, and in terms of a developmental analysis, by means of a cross-sectional analysis, comparing three classrooms results.

Analyses results, shown in Fig.1, are expressed in percentage terms⁷ to avoid any bias effect by controlling contexts in which each combination would be present, as also suggested by Howard (2000), and because of a differential representation, in the submitted task, of the examined categories (i.e. interactions between each Aspect inflection and each semantic class).

Each class results show, at a different degree, that perfective inflections are globally more often used than imperfective ones and that each inflection type is preferably used with specific semantic classes. To discuss some examples in detail, let us observe the distributional pattern in each single group.

⁷ In Fig. 1, the 100% represents the total number of responses coherent with the aspectual definition of each context we would expect according to theoretical definitions. Coherent produced forms will be shown, while the complement to 100% will include forms produced with the unexpected Aspect inflection.

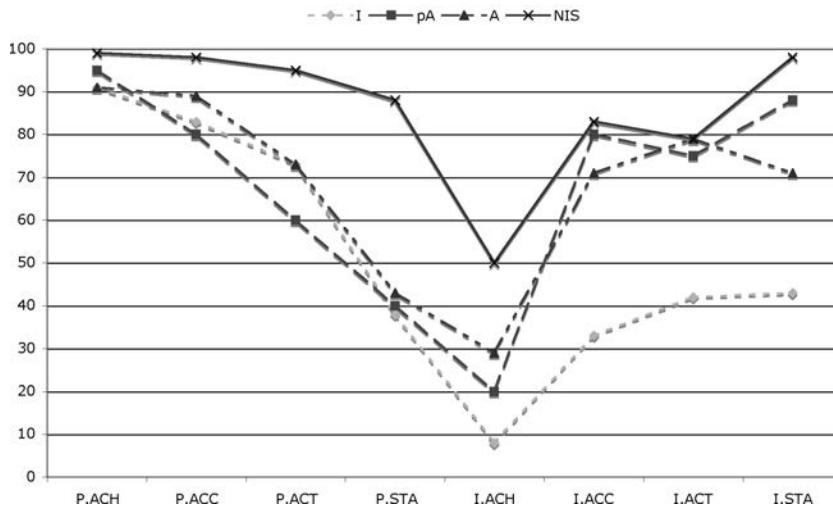


Figure 1

Percentage distribution of correct forms of Aspect markers across Actionality classes in learners and native speakers production⁸.

In the Intermediate level classroom, percentages of the correct use of perfective past inflections range from 38% to 91%, while percentages collapse when coming to imperfective past inflections (range: 43% to 8%). Range across semantic classes aligns with AH predictions: Achievement predicates are preferably associated with perfective inflections (91% of correct answers) than with imperfective inflections (8% of correct answers). Accomplishment and Activity predicates show a similar trend (respectively: perfective 83%, 73%; imperfective 33%, 42%), while State predicates do not show a strong preference between the two aspectual inflections (perfective: 38%; imperfective: 43%).

To examine deeply the use of aspectual inflections and to infer a developmental pattern from results of the three observed classrooms, let us consider the average value for correct answers (Tab. 4 and 5).

In Tab. 4, average value for use of each past inflections is shown: learners at the Intermediate level appear to be the most strongly biased toward the use of perfective past inflections (71.25%) compared to imperfective ones (31.5%), while students at higher levels show an increasing use of imperfective inflections, which redoubles, and stable values for perfective past inflections.

⁸ P = perfective, I = imperfective; ACH = Achievement, ACC = Accomplishment, ACT = Activity, STA = State; I = intermediate, pA = pre-advanced, A = advanced, NIS = Native Italian Speakers.

	I	pA	A	NIS
Perfective inflections	71.25	68.75	74	95
Imperfective inflections	31.5	65.75	62.5	77.5

Table 4

Average values of correct answers: Perfective vs. Imperfective.

Average values show that in pre-Advanced (pA) data perfective inflections have a percentage lower than that of Intermediate level (I): in detail, it is worth notice that Accomplishment and Activity predicates are less often inflected as perfective (Fig. 1: respectively I: 83%, 73% > pA: 80%, 60%), in correspondence of a notable increase of correctly produced imperfective forms for predicates belonging to the same Actionality classes (respectively I: 33%, 42% > pA: 80%, 75%).

Concerning semantic classes, average of correct answers is increasing across classrooms, as we can see in Tab. 5: the most notable effects, beside the discussed difference in the use of perfective vs. imperfective inflections, relate to the associations between aspect inflections and specific semantic classes, as predicted by AH.

Predictions of AH seem to be respected: at the pre-advanced level, as an example, students produce the highest percentage of imperfective inflections with stative predicates (88%), i.e. in case of a prototypical interaction, while, on the opposite side of the interactions continuum, Achievement predicates only rarely (20%) are inflected as imperfective. The same holds within each classroom.

In more detail, Tab. 4 shows that perfective and imperfective inflections enter the system quite systematically across the four semantic categories, as predicted by AH developmental sequences illustrated in 2.2: perfective inflections spread quite regularly⁹, in each classroom of learners and across proficiency levels, from Achievement to State in respect of the expected sequence (see a-sequence in 2.2), in a top-down, left-to-right reading of Tab. 5.

If this trend appears to be quite regular when related to perfective past inflections (ex. pA level: P.ACH 95% > P.ACC 80% > P.ACT 75% > P.STA 40%), it is more challenging when concerning imperfective past inflections (see b-sequence in 2.2): in a bottom-up, left-to-right, reading of Tab. 5, imper-

⁹ With the only, however not significantly divergent, exceptions, for a developmental pattern, of P.ACH which decrease from pA to A (95% > 91%) and of the discussed cases of P.ACC and P.ACT which decrease from I to pA (P.ACC 83% > 80%; P.ACT 73% > 60%).

	I	pA	A	NIS
P.ACH	91	95	91	99
I.ACH	8	20	29	50
average	49.5	57.5	60	74.5
P.ACC	83	80	89	98
I.ACC	33	80	71	83
average	58	80	80	90.5
P.ACT	73	60	73	95
I.ACT	42	75	79	79
average	57.5	67.5	76	87
P.STA	38	40	43	88
I.STA	43	88	71	98
average	40.5	64	57	93

Table 5

Average values for correct answers in each semantic class.

fective markers spread across classrooms and across semantic classes but in a less systematic way. To illustrate: in I level, imperfective inflections follow the predicted pattern (I.STA 43%>I.ACT 42%>I.ACC 33%>I.ACH 8%), while in pA level imperfective inflections do not follow exactly the pattern (I.STA 88%>I.ACT 75%>I.ACC 80%>I.ACH 20%).

To sum up briefly, the distributional pattern of past inflections in our data accords to AH in that:

1. both inflections are preferably used with specific semantic classes (perfective with telic, imperfective with non-telic predicates);
2. there is a general broader use of perfective than imperfective past inflections.

We compare the three classes results, already discussed in the preceding sessions and visually shown in Tab. 5, to infer a developmental pattern from our data¹⁰: Intermediate level shows the lowest average use of imperfective

¹⁰ Caution is needed when considering the cross-sectional analysis because of the different

inflections (Tab. 4) while the subsequent level show a double value of average score. Pre-advanced level students appear to lower percentage values for perfective Accomplishment and perfective Activity when compared to the lower level, while the Advanced level reaches a percentage even or higher than that of the Intermediate level (i.e. P. Accomplishment: Intermediate 83%; Pre-Advanced 80%; Advanced 89%; P. Activity: Intermediate=Advanced 73%; Pre-Advanced 60%). Otherwise, no significant differences appear to distinguish pre-Advanced and Advanced level: average scores, as well as the picture in Tab. 5, show similar patterns.

In the preceding sessions, we deliberately left out considerations about native speakers results: from Tab. 5, it is immediate to infer that native speakers reach the highest percentages for each of the categories that have been considered (i.e.: interactions between aspectual inflections and each of the semantic classes). However, some considerations are still needed because of the different average use of imperfective vs. perfective past inflections (77.5% vs. 95%; Tab. 4) and because of the different distribution of aspectual inflections across semantic categories (Tab. 4): highest scores are reached in case of perfective Achievement (99%) and imperfective State (98%), which are considered the most prototypical interactions. In case of the other categories, a preference for perfective inflections is widespread across each semantic class, with the only exception of State, which are more often associated with imperfective than perfective. In particular, NIS appear to be split in two groups in case of imperfective Achievement (50% of correct answers).

The results seem to confirm that a Distributional Bias partly holds in native speech, as asserted in Stephany (1981), Andersen and Shirai (1996). The distributional bias can be interpreted, according to Andersen (1991), as a statistical tendency to prefer the prototypical association between Aspect and Actuality¹¹, that are interpreted by learners as absolute. The differences between native speakers and learners become more evident in the use of non-prototypical interactions, namely imperfective Achievement or perfective State. It is important to consider at this point that the most deviant interaction (imperfective Achievement) was the less represented in our test, so this result could benefit from further investigations.

However, from our data it clearly emerges that native speakers can produce correct answers for the problematic interactions in higher percentages (I.Ach

setting of the three classes (I in U.S.A. vs. pA and A in Italy) and because cross-sectional results have to be considered not an absolute trend but, rather, statistically significant tendencies (ANDERSEN, 1991).

¹¹ This high frequency preference has been explained according to Relevance and to Congruence Principles (see par. 5).

50%, P.Stat 88%) more than learners (I.Ach 8, 20, 29%; P.Stat 38, 40, 43%).

Not much attempt has been made in the area of AH to investigate the relationships between input and acquisition, Andersen and Shirai (1996: 549). The attempt we made, even if limited with respect to speakers number and to the specific task (§3.2), has proved to be a viable procedure with interesting results that will be explored with further studies.

Finally, internal factors as gender and Romance languages prior knowledge were included in the study design: although provisional due to the small N-size the results suggest a role for gender and for prior knowledge of Romance languages. Biological gender proved to have a role in that female students showed a better performance with less-prototypical interaction, at the pA level. Data point out a role for prior knowledge of other Romance languages, Bowden *et al.* (2005): it emerges that, at the Intermediate level, learners studying Italian as a L3 and speaking a Romance language as a L2, compared to student monolingual as well as to student speaking a non-Romance language as a second language, produce a higher percentage of non-prototypical interactions. Results accord to Gass (1996), who notices that the influence of L1 is maximally valuable at the beginning stages of SLA process.

Although provisional due to the small numerical size of our sample, the results suggest indeed a role for internal factors and a methodological caveat, in that different effects are found at different levels of proficiency.

5. Discussion

The data from instructed learners of Italian L2 turn out consistent with non-instructed learners data. The mastery of Tense-Aspect morphology is a gradual process and learners go through systematic stages of acquisition, following the developmental pattern proposed by AH. The results confirm a distributional bias in Italian native speakers production, as well, according to DBH.

How does the literature explain AH and DBH?

At the beginning of the debate on AH, the distribution of Tense-Aspect morphology in FLA led scholars to propose that children performance was due to a not yet completed cognitive development. But, since data from SLA provided evidence of the same acquisitional pattern in adult learners, explanation based on cognitive development was rejected. Successively, Andersen and Shirai (1994) hypothesised three cognitive principles to account for this acquisitional strategy: Relevance Principle, Slobin (1985), Congruence Principle, Andersen (1993) and One-to-One Principle, Andersen (1984). According to the Relevance Principle and the Congruence Principle, learners match Aspect

morphological inflections with specific Actionality classes. This claim extends what Andersen (1993: 328-329) says for FLA: «The first inflections that children use are those that are most relevant to the meaning of the predicate (the Relevance Principle) and, of those inflections, it is the inflection whose meaning is most congruent with the meaning of the verb that will be attached to a particular verb (the Congruence Principle)».

In other words, following the Relevance Principle, learners acquire perfective before than imperfective inflections because when learners get into past dimension they perceived the perfective marker as expression of the most relevant meaning of past tense. Imperfective Aspect is hardly associated to past tense, because of its durative and unbounded features. This convergence of the prototype notion of past and the perfective inflection would explain why past marking is used by learners as the typical perfective marking. Both aspectual inflections are prevalently selected with predicates whose actional meaning is more congruent to them, according to Congruence Principles: perfective past tense with Achievement and Accomplishment predicates, telic as characterized by an inherent end point, and imperfective past tense with State and Activity predicates, durative and atelic.

The same principles are invoked in explaining the distributional bias that has been found in the native speakers production, but learners appear to interpret a high frequency preference they actually find in the input, as an absolute one-to-one form-meaning correspondence, according to One-to-One Principle. The end point of the acquisitional process is to reach the native use, that appears to be characterized by the capacity of alternating perfective and imperfective interpretation for every predicate and to encode it with the most appropriate inflection.

As an example, an Accomplishment predicate is marked with perfective Aspect when it presented a selected realized bounded event, but the same predicate can be marked with imperfective Aspect when it refers to habitual or iterative behaviour. Notice the difference between the two examples, extracted from the fill-in-the-blank task, where natives associate the same Achievement predicate 'cadere' (to fall down) with perfective past, the most congruent Aspect marker for a telic predicate, in the perfective context [ex. 5], where the event of falling is presented as instantaneous within the longer event of going back, and with imperfective past in the imperfective context [ex. 6], where the subject 'the rain' implies an iterative interpretation:

Ex. 5. *Al ritorno, mentre noi ... [scendere] con le biciclette,
io ... [scivolare] e ... [cadere].*

While we were going back down by bicycle, I skidded and fell.

NATIVE PRODUCTION: SONO CADUTO (I FELL)

Ex. 6. *Dopo che noi ... [trascorrere] un giorno intero in hotel
a guardare la pioggia che ... [cadere].*

After a whole day spent in the hotel watching the falling rain.

NATIVE PRODUCTION: CADEVA (WAS FALLING DOWN)

This ability is what Andersen (1994) calls *Insider's Advantage*. The challenge for learner is to free from the adherence to One-to-One Principle and to respect the Relevance and Congruence Principles as native speakers do.

The result that AH holds in instructed as well as in non-instructed Italian Acquisition confirms the “teachability hypothesis”, Pienemann (1989). The author claims that instruction can not modify the natural acquisition pattern, but its effect is to accelerate the process of acquisition, when teachers explain the topics that learner is competent to understand and acquire. The comparison between instructed and non-instructed learners' production, indeed, shows that in both samples the most prototypical Aspect-Actionality associations are preferred and that the spread of Aspect markers follows the acquisitional pattern reported in par. 2.2. A formal rather than functional difference is that the interlanguage of instructed learners turns out more grammatically accurate than non-instructed learners' data of the Corpus of Pavia, Andorno (2001). In this corpus are systematically produced by less advanced learners ungrammatical forms of past, as the Passato Prossimo without the auxiliary and present instead of imperfective past. These formally deviant productions are very rare in our instructed corpus, because of the attention of grammatical formation of tenses paid in classroom.

Some didactic implications can be drawn from the results. Literature on pedagogical interventions on L2 acquisition have found evidence for that structured input and explicit presentation of rules have a significant effect in learners' abilities to learn target-like forms, Bowden *et al.* (2005). According to this literature, it is possible to infer that a proposal for teaching is to follow the naturalistic order of acquisition, by teaching the perfective before the imperfective past. Teachers should also explicitly focus on the least prototypical Aspect-Actionality associations, as also suggested by Bardovi-Harlig (2000), and provide explicit description of native speakers' use of Tense-Aspect morphology.

The positive results of explicit instruction come from learners' meta-linguistic reflections, elicited during the task's correction. Learners turn out to be able to assimilate as parameter for selection of Tense-Aspect morphology the communicative need to distinguish the discourse role of Foreground, the main point of talk, and Background, the supporting information, following the instructions of teachers, Rosi (in press b). As Andersen and Shirai argued (1994:152), «Achievement and Accomplishment typically fill the central role of laying out events in narration and are logical recipient for past perfective

marking. State and Activity typically serve supporting roles, and tend to be inflected with past imperfective morphemes». In classroom, teachers use to explain the opposition between the two past forms by means of the example: «while an event was developing, suddenly an other event happened». Similar formulas are reported in textbooks, that focus on the use of imperfective past with specific temporal conjunctions, as 'mentre' (while). The meta-linguistic data¹² show that learners follow this grammatical rules, as in the reflection reported below that is referred to ex. 6:

Learner 1: «*l'imperfetto perché è una descrizione e poi avviene un'azione*» «the imperfective past because it is a description and then an event happens»

Additionally, the data suggest a methodological caveat, in that different effects for internal factors, as biological gender and prior knowledge of other Romance languages, seem to emerge from each of the levels of proficiency. Statistical analysis would have shed further light on the role of internal factors, so we postponed this analysis because of the small size of our samples.

6. Conclusion

This study finds empirical support for the Aspect Hypothesis in instructed acquisition of Italian as a Second Language. The comparison among three different proficiency levels points to an increasing use of both Aspect inflections in the less prototypical interactions between Aspect and Actionality, toward the native-like use. This paper contributes to the current debate by explicitly and empirically addressing the Distributional Bias Hypothesis and including native speakers data. The results, however, are intended to be presented as those of a pilot study, limited as concerning the small N-size of our sample and the subsequent inferences.

According to our results, native speakers show a bias in that they prefer to associate Achievement predicates more often with perfective than with imperfective, State predicates more often with imperfective than perfective, similarly to what has been found in learners strategy. As expected, the difference between natives and non-natives is that native speakers produce the less-prototypical interactions more often than learners do, since they are able to disassociate the Aspect inflections from prototypical instances.

Internal factors, as biological gender and prior knowledge of Romance languages, prove to be fruitfully included in the study design: the actual effects

¹² For further discussion about meta-linguistic reflections of learners see ROSI (in press b, c).

of these factors emerge from one specific level: pre-Advanced for gender; Intermediate for prior knowledge of Romance languages. These results may suggest a methodological caveat. The facilitative influence of internal factors on language learning, MacIntyre *et al.* (2002), Bowden *et al.* (2005), effects differently in different levels of target language proficiency. So it is worth to analyze these parameters within and not across several proficiency levels.

Many answers remain to be addressed: how do learners free from the One-to-One principle? What is the role of the input in that process? What internal factors and what external factors have major role? How instruction does influence the acquisitional pattern in terms of eventual unwanted effects, as over-generalization (SALABERRY and SHIRAI, 2002)?

Our results suggest that further studies will be worthily devoted to fully examine the native strategy and how learners approach it.

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted thanks to the collaboration of Università per Stranieri di Perugia, Italy, and Georgetown University, Washington D.C.

We are grateful to Stefania Giannini, Anna Giacalone Ramat, Romano Lazzeroni, Pier Marco Bertinetto for supporting us with precious feedbacks and comments. We are thankful to Alessandro Lenci, Lidia Costamagna, Marina Chini, Stefania Scaglione for helpful comments during the development of this paper.

JC warmly thanks Anna De Fina, Alfons Morales-Front, Cristina Sanz and Cosetta Seno Reed for their kind and collaborative hospitality.

References

- ANDERSEN, R.W. (1984), *The one to one principle of interlanguage construction*, in «Language Learning», 34, pp. 77-95.
- (1991), *Developmental sequences: emergence of Aspect marking in second and language acquisition*, in HUEBNER, T. and FERGUSON, C.A. (1991, eds.), pp. 305-324.
- (1993), *Four operating principles and input distribution as explanations for underdeveloped and mature morphological systems*, in HYLSTENSTAM, K. and VIBERG, A. (1993, eds.), pp. 309-339.
- (1994), *The insider's advantage*, in GIACALONE RAMAT, A. and VEDOVELLI, M. (1994, eds.), pp. 1-26.
- ANDERSEN, R.W. and SHIRAI, Y. (1994), *Discourse motivation for some cognitive acquisition principles*, in «Studies in Second Language Acquisition», 16, pp. 133-156.

- ANDERSEN, R.W. and SHIRAI, Y. (1996), *The primacy of aspect in first and second language acquisition: the pidgin-creole connection*, in RITCHIE, W.C. and BHATIA, T.J. (1996, eds.), pp. 527-569.
- ANDORNO, C. (2001), *Banca dati dell'italiano L2*, Dipartimento di Linguistica, Università degli Studi di Pavia.
- ANTINUCCI, F. and MILLER, R. (1976), *How children talk about what happened*, in «Journal of Child Language», 3, pp. 167-189.
- BANFI, E. and CORDIN, P. (1990, eds.), *Storia dell'italiano e forme di italianizzazione*, Bulzoni, Roma.
- BANFI, E. and BERNINI, G. (2003), *Il verbo*, in GIACALONE RAMAT, A. (2003, ed.), pp. 70-115.
- BARDOVI-HARLIG, K. (1992), *The relationship of form and meaning: a cross-sectional study of Tense and Aspect in the interlanguage of learners of English as a second language*, in «Applied Psycholinguistics», 13, pp. 257-278.
- BARDOVI-HARLIG, K. (2000), *Tense and Aspect in Second Language Acquisition: form, meaning and use*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- (2002), *Analysing Aspect*, in SALABERRY, R. and SHIRAI, Y. (2002, eds.), pp. 129-152.
- BAYLEY, R.J. (1999), *The primacy of Aspect Hypothesis revisited: Evidence from language shift*, in «Southwest Journal of Linguistics», II, 18, pp. 1-22.
- BERNINI, G. (1990 b), *L'acquisizione dell'imperfetto nell'italiano lingua seconda*, in BANFI, E. and CORDIN, P. (1990, eds.), pp. 157-179.
- BERTINETTO, P.M. (1986), *Tempo, aspetto e azione nel verbo italiano. Il sistema dell'indicativo*, Accademia della Crusca, Firenze.
- (1991), *Il verbo*, in RENZI, L. and SALVI, G. (1991, eds.), pp. 13-161.
- (1997), *Il dominio tempo-aspettuale. Demarcazioni, intersezioni, contrasti*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino.
- BERTINETTO, P.M., BIANCHI, V., HIGGINBOTHAM, J., SQUARTINI, M. (1995, eds.), *Temporal reference. Aspect and Actionality*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino.
- BERTINETTO, P.M. and DELFITTO, D. (2000), *Aspect vs. Actionality: Why they should be kept apart*, in DAHL, Ö. (2000, ed.), pp. 189-223.
- BICKERTON, D. (1981), *Roots of language*, Ann Arbor, Karoma.
- BOWDEN, H.W., SANZ, C. and STAFFORD, C.A. (2005), *Individual differences: age, gender, working memory, and prior knowledge*, in SANZ, C. (2005, ed.), pp. 158-215.
- BRONCKART, J.P. and SINCLAIR, H. (1973), *Time, Tense and Aspect*, in «Cognition», 2, pp. 107-130.
- BYBEE, J.L. (1985), *Morphology: A study of the relation between meaning and form*, Benjamin, Amsterdam.
- CHINI, M., DESIDERI P., FAVILLA, E., PALLOTTI, G. (in press, eds.), *Atti del VI Congresso Nazionale AltLA*, Guerra, Perugia.
- COMRIE, B. (1976), *Aspect*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- COSTAMAGNA, L. and SCAGLIONE, S. (in press, eds.), *Condizioni di apprendimento e perdita dell'italiano*, Franco Angeli, Milano.
- DAHL, Ö. (1985), *Tense and Aspect System*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- (2000, ed.), *Tense and Aspect in language of Europe. EUROTYP 20-6*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin-London.
- DALE, P. and INGRAM, D. (1981, eds.), *Child language: an international perspective*, University Park Press, Baltimore.
- DRESSLER, W.U. (2005), *L'acquisizione della morfologia: teorie e modelli*, Seminari di Linguistica della Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa.
- GASS S. (1996), *Second Language Acquisition and Linguistic theory: the role of language Transfer*, in RITCHIE, W.C. and BHATIA, T.K. (1996, eds.), pp. 317-348.
- GIACALONE RAMAT, A. (1995a), *Tense and Aspect in learner Italian*, in BERTINETTO *et al.* (1995, eds.), pp. 289-307.
- (1995b), *L'expression de l'Aspect progressif en italien seconde langue et le rôle des propriétés sémantiques des verbes*, in «Acquisition et Interaction en Langue Etrangère», 5, pp. 47-78.
- (2002), *How do learners acquire the classical three categories of temporality*, in SALABERRY, R. and SHIRAI, Y. (2002, eds.), pp. 221-48.
- (2003, ed.), *Verso l'italiano*, Carocci, Roma.
- GIACALONE RAMAT, A. and VEDOVELLI, M. (1994, eds.), *Italiano lingua seconda/ lingua straniera. Atti del XXVI Convegno internazionale di studi della Società di linguistica italiana (Siena, 5-7 novembre 1992)*, Bulzoni, Roma.
- GIACALONE RAMAT, A. and BANFI, E. (1990, eds.), *Acquisition of temporality. A second language perspective*, in «Folia Linguistica», XXIV, 3-4, pp. 405-428.
- HOWARD, M. (2000), *Prototypical and non-prototypical making in the advanced learners' aspect-temporal system*, presented at 3rd Euroconference "The structure of learners varieties", San Feliu de Guixols, Spain.
- HUEBNER, T. and FERGUSON, C.A. (1991, eds.), *Crosscurrents in Second Language Acquisition and Linguistic Theories*, Benjamins, Amsterdam-Philadelphia.
- HYLTENSTAM, K. and VIBERG, A. (1993, eds.) *Progression and Regression in Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- KLEIN, W. (1994), *Time in Language*, Routledge, London.
- MACINTYRE, P.D., BAKER, C., CLÉMENT, R., DONOVAN, L.A. (2002), *Sex and Age Effects on Willingness to Communicate, Anxiety, Perceived Competence and L2 Motivation Among Junior High School French Immersion Students*, in «Language Learning», 52, pp. 537-564.
- PIENEMANN, M. (1989), *Is language learnable? Psycholinguistic experiments and hypotheses*, in «Applied Linguistics», 10, pp. 52-79.
- REICHENBACH, H. (1947), *Elements of symbolic logic*, MacMillan, London.
- RENZI, L. and SALVI, G. (1991, eds.), *Grande grammatica italiana di consultazione*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

- RITCHIE, W.C. and BHATIA, T.J. (1996, eds.), *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, Academic Press, San Diego.
- ROSCH, E. (1973), *Natural categories*, in «Cognitive Psychology», 4, pp. 328-350.
- ROSI, F. (2004), *L'interazione fra aspetto e Aktionsart nell'apprendimento guidato dell'italiano L2 da parte di anglofoni*, Unpublished MA Dissertation, University of Pisa.
- (2006), *L'interazione fra Aspetto e Aktionsart nelle interlingue di apprendenti avanzati di italiano L2*, in «Studi Italiani di Linguistica Teorica e Applicata», 1, pp. 49-72.
- (in press a), *Imparare il passato italiano in classe*, in CHINI, M. et al. (in press, eds.).
- (in press b), *Le categorie tempo-aspettuali dell'Italiano in prospettiva acquisizionale*, in COSTAMAGNA, L. and SCAGLIONE, S. (in press, eds.).
- SALABERRY, R. and SHIRAI, Y. (2002, eds.), *Description and explanation in the L2 acquisition of tense-aspect morphology*, Benjamins, Amsterdam-Philadelphia.
- SANZ, C. (2005, ed.), *Mind and Context in Adult Second Language Acquisition: Method, Theory, and Practice*, Georgetown University Press, Washington.
- SANZ, C. and MORGAN SHORT, K. (2005), *Explicitness in pedagogical interventions: Input, Practice and Feedback*, in SANZ, C. (2005, ed.), pp. 356-398.
- SHIRAI, Y. and ANDERSEN, R.W. (1995), *The acquisition of Tense-Aspect Morphology: a Prototype Account*, in «Language», 71, pp. 743-762.
- SLOBIN, D.I. (1985), *Crosslinguistic evidence for the Language-Making Capacity*, in SLOBIN, D.I. (1985, ed.), pp. 1157-1256.
- (1985, ed.), *The crosslinguistic study of language acquisition. Vol. 2: Theoretical issues*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ.
- STEFANY, U. (1981), *Verbal grammar in modern Greek early child language*, in DALE, P. and INGRAM, D. (1981, eds.), pp. 45-57.
- TAYLOR, J.R. (1989), *Linguistic categorization, prototypes in linguistic theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- VENDLER, Z. (1967), *Verbs and times*, in VENDLER, Z. (1967, ed.), pp. 97-121.
- (1967, ed.), *Linguistics in Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y.
- VINCE, M. (1994), *Advanced Language Practice*, Mac Millan, Oxford.
- WEIST, R.M., WYSOCKA, H., WITKOWSKA-STADNICK, K., BUCZOWSKA, E., KONIECZNA, E. (1984), *The defective tense hypothesis: on the emergence of tense and Aspect in child polish*, in «Journal of Child Language», 11, pp. 347-374.

APPENDIX

The fill-in-the-blank task

Completa i seguenti brani utilizzando i tempi del passato che ritieni opportuni (Please complete the following texts using the verb in brackets, the subject has been repeated in brackets to eventually clarify the sentence, but it is not necessary to repeat it)

Il mio trasferimento a Londra

Sono passati tre anni da quando.....(io, decidere) di andare a vivere a Londra.

Fin dal momento in cui (io, decidere) di trasferirmi, mi (io, chiedersi) se la decisione che avevo preso.....(la decisione, essere) la migliore.

Infatti, da sempre,(io, sentire) molte cose negative sul fatto di vivere in una città così grande e tutto questo.....(tutto questo, iniziare) a preoccuparmi.

Inoltre,(io, crescere) in un piccolo paese di campagna, dove(io, vivere) sempre.

Dubbi inutili però: infatti ormai(impersonale, please use 3p. Sing.; essere) troppo tardi per cambiare idea, poiché.....(io, vendere) già la mia vecchia casa e.....(io, trovare) già un nuovo lavoro.

In fondo, però, questo era sempre stato il mio sogno:(io, volere) sempre vivere in una grande città. Questo spiega perché, appena il mio capo mi..... (capo, offrire) un nuovo lavoro a Londra, (io, accettare) subito.

I primi.....(primi tempi, essere) difficili: non(io, conoscere) nessuno, la città mi.....(città, sembrare) troppo grande e spesso(io, perdermi).

Lentamente però.....(io, conoscere) molte persone simpatiche e spesso.....(noi, uscire) insieme e(noi, organizzare) delle cene divertenti.

Il viaggio in Italia

L'anno scorso, in questo stesso periodo dell'anno,(io, essere) in Italia e, insieme con i miei amici,(io, andare) in bicicletta verso Nord.

Prima di partire per l'Italia,(noi, decidere) di fare una vacanza in bicicletta di due settimane: io però non (io, sapere) che il mio viaggio sarebbe stato molto più breve!

Infatti,.....(noi, organizzare) tutto il viaggio, ma non.....(noi, pensare) alle previsioni delle tempo.

Dal giorno in cui.....(noi, arrivare) in Italia, (impersonale, please use 3pers. Sing., piovere) di continuo, senza smettere un attimo.

Dopo che.....(noi, trascorrere) un giorno intero in hotel a guardare la pioggia che..... (pioggia, cadere), (noi, decidere) di uscire ugualmente il giorno seguente.

La mattina dopo, quindi, (noi, uscire) molto presto e (noi, salire) sul monte più vicino. Arrivati sulla vetta, finalmente (impersonale, please use 3pers. Sing., smettere) di piovere e..... (noi, ammirare) un bellissimo panorama.

Al ritorno, mentre.....(noi, scendere) con le biciclette,(io, scivolare) e.....(io, cadere).

I miei amici, naturalmente,.....(miei amici, spaventarsi) molto e mi.....(amici, portare) all'ospedale, dal momento che io non(io, potere) camminare.

Appena il dottore mi.....(dottore, dire) che il mio braccio.....(braccio, rompersi), i..... (io, capire) che la mia vacanza(vacanza, finire) e che io..... (io, dovere) tornare subito a casa.

RECENSIONI

