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# Subtle differences, rigorous implications: German and Dutch representation of tense-aspect features in SLA research of Spanish

**Abstract:** This article presents original evidence for an L1-effect in SLA by comparing empirical studies on German and Dutch learners of L2 Spanish (written production). In Spanish, grammatical aspect plays a far more prominent role (perfectivity is grammaticalized) and thus both learner groups are faced with new linguistic features. In both cases, L1-like performance is not achieved. However, the ways learners deal with this aspectual phenomenon in their written production is completely different: German learners base their decision on temporal markers and trigger words, whereas Dutch learners consider inherent verbal aspect. We explain this contrast by analysing small differences between the involved L1 systems: only Dutch learners depart from a system with basic aspectual notions.

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Artikel präsentiert neuartige Evidenzen für einen L1-Effekt im Zweitspracherwerb, indem empirische Studien zu deutschen und niederländischen Lernenden des Spanischen als L2 verglichen werden (schriftliche Produktionsdaten). Im Spanischen spielt grammatischer Aspekt eine prominentere Rolle (Perfektivität ist grammatikalisiert), wodurch beide Lerner-Gruppen mit neuen Merkmalen konfrontiert werden. In beiden Fällen wird keine muttersprachliche Performanz beobachtet. Jedoch unterscheiden sich die Weisen, in denen mit aspektuellen Phänomenen umgegangen wird: Deutsche Lernende gründen ihre Entscheidungen auf Signalwörter, während niederländische Lernende den inhärenten Verbalaspekt berücksichtigen. Wir erklären diesen Kontrast durch eine Analyse von kleinen Unterschieden in den L1-Systemen: Nur niederländische Lerner starten von einem System mit grundlegenden aspektuellen Konzepten.

## 1 Introduction

Probably the most distinguishing property of adult L2 learners, besides their age of onset, is the fact that they already have a fully developed language system,

acquired during their first language (L1) acquisition. One obvious question is to what extent, if at all, the L1 system influences the L2 acquisition process (see e.g. White 2003 for an overview). In the research literature, the notion of L1-effects is controversial. Whereas some researchers consider the L1 as main source for learning difficulties, others claim that it is the complexity of the linguistic property to be acquired which decisively affects the process.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, we want to contribute to that discussion by synthesizing the work of several previous studies which, when contrasted, reveal intriguing differences between several groups of learners. For this purpose, we will focus on Dutch and German-speaking learners of Spanish as L2. The testing ground consists of the tense-aspect-systems of these languages.

The conclusion drawn from this comparison affects the description of the languages itself. Although an immediate comparison of the verb systems of Dutch and German only reveals minor differences and leaves substantial uncertainties in several respects, these differences have a great effect on how interlanguages look. This supports two claims made in this chapter: firstly, there is a clear L1-effect which is manifested even if the L1s in question do not seem to rigorously differ from each other. Secondly, the differences between the tense systems in German and Dutch are indeed present and sharply distinguish the verb systems from each other.

Generally, the mastery of any Romance tense-aspect system is known to be highly challenging for Germanic speakers. However, although all Germanic learners show difficulties when producing the targeted Romance forms, there is a significant difference in how they try to compensate for them, i.e. which type of learning strategies are (consciously or implicitly) applied to overcome a possible lack of knowledge (see e.g. Cadierno 2000). As results from previous studies show, Dutch learners use aspectual distinctions in the L2 but commit errors when selecting the aspectual level (inherent instead of grammatical). German learners, in contrast, do not consider inherent aspectual properties when selecting a form, but rely on elements of the linguistic surface such as adverbs or other lexical elements.

Based on a review of these results, we aim to derive an important implication for linguistic analysis and description, as the comparison between the interlanguages of L2 learners will give us insight into the differences between the L1 characteristics.

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<sup>1</sup> We owe many thanks to Henk Verkuyl and Geert Booij for their valuable comments on earlier versions, and also to Jill Jeffery for the last revisions. We profited very much from anonymous reviews and editor comments.

The organization of our chapter follows the outlined argumentation: in section 2, we describe the tense-aspect systems of German, Dutch and Spanish, focussing in detail on the (partially subtle) differences between the two Germanic languages and the challenges presented in the Romance language. In the next paragraph, we will summarize existing studies on different learner groups, according to their L1 (section 3). New in this context is the cross-linguistic contrast of these studies, leading to a meta-comparison of the results that are significantly different from each other. The chapter closes with a general discussion and conclusion.

The main point consists of the observation that the manifested differences between the learners prove that the German and the Dutch grammar clearly have their own intrinsic temporal system. Although these differences seem subtle from a perspective of grammatical description, they lead to very different outcomes in SLA.

## 2 Aspectual systems

### 2.1 Inherent Aspect

When talking about aspectual information, two levels can be distinguished: the inherent level and the grammatical one. However, both levels share certain properties and may even interact with each other, which has led to different proposals regarding how to categorize the phenomena.<sup>2,3</sup> The most relevant argument for the present chapter is that the expression of aspect as a grammatical contrast is subject to cross-linguistic variation. Here, inherent aspect is clearly different from grammatical aspect, as it refers to a universal property of language which allows to categorize verb predicates into different classes according to their semantic

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<sup>2</sup> We choose the term inherent because the notion of lexical aspect is misleading: we want to talk about the predication rather than the verb itself. We thus approach the topic at phrase level to experience an inherent boundedness interpretation (compare the tenseless predicates *She read a book* vs. *She read books* vs. *No one read a book*, which, although featuring the same verb, differ in their inherent aspect, as will be shown later in this chapter).

<sup>3</sup> Within the generativist framework, some researchers highlight the fact of similarity and propose that inherent and grammatical aspectual levels are coded together within one aspectual phrase (Tsimplici/Papadopoulou 2009). Others hypothesize that those two levels are completely separated from each other (e.g. Diaubalick/Guijarro-Fuentes 2016; Rothman 2008).

content. Crucially, this is possible without a concrete grammatical context (Comrie 1976)<sup>4</sup>.

Although most researchers agree on the theoretical possibility of categorizing inherent aspect into various disjoint classes, they disagree as to how to define such classes. The initiator of this type of semantic differentiation is Vendler (1957). Thanks to his four-way partition, other researchers have been able to refine the division and simplify it into three- or two-way partitions. A short description of some of these approaches follows.

Vendler (1957) classified verbs into states, activities, accomplishments and achievements. State verbs are characterized by the lack of dynamicity and are thus stable over a longer time period (*be, love, hate*). Activity verbs, in contrast, are dynamic and require the addition of energy (*read, walk, swim*). In contrast to accomplishments and achievements, they carry no inherent point of termination and can be extended or shortened. Finally, the distinction between accomplishment (*read a book, walk a mile*) and achievement verbs (*find, arrive, die*) lies in the fact that the latter are perceived as punctual<sup>5</sup>.

Building upon these concepts, Comrie (1976: 41–51) shows that three features underlie this classification: stativity, telicity and punctuality. Whereas the definitions of stative (contrasting with dynamic) and punctual verbs (contrasting with durative ones) are merely formal reflections of the corresponding intuitions, the notion of telicity needs further clarification: this concept refers to the culmination of actions and is to be understood as carrying an inherent end-point. Oppositely, the end-point of atelic events is arbitrary. Accomplishment and achievement verbs are considered telic whereas states and activity verbs are understood as atelic. As this notion is a priori little intuitive, several tests have been developed to determine the (a)telicity of a predicate. For instance, Giorgi/Pianesi (1997) state that only telic verbs allow the combination with *in*-adverbials (e.g. ‘*to read a book in one hour*’), atelic verbs combine with *for*-adverbials (e.g. ‘*to read for hours*’).

Such tests are not unproblematic, as there are contexts that allow both types but with different readings (see Salaberry 2008; Shirai 2013, among others). This problem can be understood as symptom of an unclear definition: inherent aspect

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<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that inherent and grammatical aspect are completely independent. Once there is a concrete grammatical context, both aspectual levels can interact with each other. Examples of coercion are given in the section treating the Spanish verb system below.

<sup>5</sup> It is unclear what is meant with verb classes. It may be that four types of predications are distinguished, but a focus on aspectual properties of the verb itself could also be meant, when discussing the case of accomplishments like ‘*buy*’ or achievements like ‘*reach*’. In the latter case, there are some inconsistencies in the use of the notion of verb, because *reach* cannot occur without a complement (see Verkuyl 1993 for a discussion).

is to be determined locally, nevertheless in most languages accomplishment verbs consist of a verb and an object. When applying the definition to verbs only, punctuality and telicity turn out to coincide. It remains unclear how many elements within a sentence must be considered. Another problem lies in the terminology itself, as the use of the term *telic* presupposes (via Vendler's appeal to Aristotle) that each motion has an inherent goal (*telos*). This Aristotelian notion is quite dubious because it is too closely connected with the idea of intentionality. Expressions like '*lose a wallet*', '*resume her seat*', or '*she came back from the window*' are quite hard to connect with the Aristotelian idea of an inherent goal on its way to completion (Verkuyl 1993). In fact, Dowty (1979) showed very early on that this conceptualization of events leads to philosophical paradoxes. If we say, for instance, that "*John was drawing a circle*" (ibid.: 133), and construct a context in which the action was started but not completed, how can we then judge if the sentence is true? Such deliberations are the reason why a more neutral term is to be preferred, and more simplified classifications have been proposed.

One such classification is found in the proposal by Moens/Steedman (1988), who argue that predicates (verb+internal argument) are partitioned between those pertaining to events and those pertaining to states. Both classes are further divided in subclasses, but in general terms the ontology can be summarised as a distinction between dynamic and non-dynamic predicates. Whereas events are defined as "happenings with defined beginnings and ends" (Moens/Steedman 1988: 17), states do not have these properties. For instance, '*climbing*' as well as '*climbing to the top*' are events, whereas '*being at the top*' is a state. As this example shows, events and states can be interrelated (in this case, the state is a consequence of the event). Nonetheless, since the property of telicity is being avoided, a problem arises with the properties of beginning and end: there is no clear distinction between arbitrary and determined points.

Due to limitations of previous frameworks, we will work with the bipartition proposed by Verkuyl (1993) who defines the concepts of terminativity and durativity. These terms unite two advantages, because, although they maintain the idea that events are characterised by termination points, they make clear that they apply to whole phrases or verbal predicates, not only to verbs, thus rendering the telic-atelic distinction unnecessary.

According to Verkuyl (1993, 1999)<sup>6</sup>, and as summarised for L2 research purposes in González (2003, 2008), the terminativity of a verb phrase is a compositional function of the properties of the verb and its arguments. The lexical semantic information given by the verb combines with structural and lexical information

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<sup>6</sup> And many others, see Shirai (2013) for a discussion.

given by the arguments to express whether the situation has, or lacks, a natural inherent endpoint (terminative versus durative<sup>7</sup> clauses). This is why this combination is called predicational aspect, as it not only depends on the semantics of the verb, but also on the semantics of the verbs and its arguments (Verkuyl 1999). The following examples show the clear difference between terminative and durative predications. This bi-partition occurs before any temporal information is given to the sentence as in the predications below, where inflection is not expressed yet.

- (1) read a book (terminative)
- (2) read newspapers (durative)
- (3) love that book (durative)

For the purposes of this chapter, two claims shared by the competing classifications are relevant: firstly, verb predicates have diverse aspectual properties and thus behave differently regarding boundedness and termination. Secondly, it is not the grammatical structure that determines these inherent aspectual properties, but the lexical features of the elements contained in the verb phrase and in a full (tenseless) predication. The grammar (i.e., tense morphology) is applied to the tenseless verb phrase in a further step and contributes additional information to the aspectual interpretation. This leads us to the concept of grammatical aspect, which is presented in the next section.

## 2.2 Grammatical Aspect

### 2.2.1 Generalities

Broadly speaking, grammatical aspect concerns the temporal boundedness of a given context, and thus can only be determined when a clear speech context is known. Different from tense, grammatical aspect is not a deictic category, and can be determined without referring to the moment of speech (Comrie 1976). Traditionally, one finds a division between perfective and imperfective aspect within grammatical aspect, which is coded in Romance languages in their past tense forms (where tense and aspect are expressed simultaneously). According to

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that the term *durative* used here carries a different meaning than the same term applied by Comrie (1976) as stated above. In the context here, durativity is not defined as a contrast to punctuality, but indicates an event without inherently defined termination point.

Domínguez/Arche/Myles (2017), four basic notions can be distinguished: progressivity, perfectivity, continuity and habituality. Progressivity, continuity and habituality have been understood as readings of the imperfective realm. There are new theoretical developments pointing to a new understanding of the progressive, standing outside the grammatical aspect spectrum (González/Verkuyl 2017). González/Verkuyl propose that the progressive use should be formally eliminated from the traditional readings of the imperfective (*ibid.*: 133). What is important to reiterate for the argumentation of this chapter is that not all languages mark grammatical aspect by the same means.

### 2.2.2 Spanish TA (Tense/Aspect) System

As a Romance language, Spanish requires the marking of grammatical aspect in its past tenses (Zagona 2007; González 2003, 2013). In the following description we will focus on three main past tense forms: Pretérito Perfecto Compuesto (Present Perfect), Pretérito Perfecto Simple (Preterit) and Pretérito Imperfecto (Imperfect). The opposition between Preterit and Imperfect represents the mentioned perfectivity/imperfectivity-contrast. However, the Present Perfect also plays a role in aspectual distinctions.<sup>8</sup>

Present Perfect:

- (4) He leído un libro.  
 I-have read.PARTICIPLE one book  
 ‘I have read a book.’

Preterit:

- (5) Leí un libro.  
 I-read.PRET one book  
 ‘I read a book.’

Imperfect:

- (6) Leía un libro.  
 I-read.IMP one book.  
 ‘I was reading/read/used to read a book.’

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<sup>8</sup> This section is an adaptation of a similar section at González/Verkuyl (2017); González/Quintana Hernández (2018).



The Present Perfect is mostly used in hodiernal contexts, where it expresses anteriority with respect to the present, and focuses on the result of the event (see (4)). This form is more common in Peninsular Spanish than in American Spanish (see González/Verkuyl (2017) for a description of this variation). However, other studies (Schwenter/Torres Cacoulios 2008) show that the Present Perfect has been extended for perfective uses in prehodiernal contexts in European Spanish, as in *He comido ayer* (I have eaten yesterday). Because of this variation, it is important to consider the Present Perfect when defining past tenses in Spanish.

The Preterit in sentence example (5) presents the event as anterior to some anchoring point provided by the discourse and completely dissociated from it. It presents an event as a discrete whole at some specific moment in the past (perfective aspect) and is not used in perfect contexts such as *\*Comí hoy* (I ate today) in European Spanish.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, Spanish counts on a morphologically marked imperfective past tense (example (6)). The Imperfect is often taken as presenting an event in process, i.e. as not delimited, which implies that the difference is aspectual, not temporal (García Fernández 1999; Leonetti 2004). It leaves the event unspecified as to its completion. There are several readings related to imperfective aspect: the progressive, the habitual and the continuous aspect (González 2003; Domínguez/Arche/Myles 2017). These related meanings all allow the Imperfect morphology<sup>10</sup>.

- (7) Laura leía el periódico en aquel instante.  
 Laura read.IMP the newspaper in that instant  
 'Laura was reading the newspaper at that moment.' (progressive)
- (8) Laura leía el periódico todos los domingos.  
 Laura read.IMP the newspaper all the Sundays.  
 'Laura read the newspaper every Sunday.' (habitual)
- (9) Laura leía el periódico aquel domingo (y todavía  
 Laura read.IMP the newspaper that Sunday (and still  
 lo lee).  
 it read.PRES)  
 'Laura read the newspaper that Sunday (and is still reading it).'  
 (continuous)

<sup>9</sup> However, this use is fully accepted in Latin American Spanish (Rojo/Veiga 1999).

<sup>10</sup> González/Verkuyl (2017) defend the idea that the progressive is not a reading of the imperfective. Yet, for the purposes of this chapter we adhere with the more traditional understanding of imperfective readings.

The Imperfect encompasses all three readings and thus can be said to under-specify which reading is the most appropriate. The concrete interpretation in a given situation does thus not only depend on the verb form, but also on the sentence context.

### 2.2.3 Germanic systems

All Germanic languages share inherent aspectual values.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to Romance languages, they contain fewer or no instances of grammatical aspect marking. Before describing the aspectual differences between Dutch and German, there are some interesting generalizations to be made: First, throughout the scientific literature on aspect, the most studied Germanic language is English (Comajoan 2014), and second, although all Germanic languages differ significantly from Romance languages, they do not present a homogeneous group.

At first sight, Dutch and German tense-aspect systems seem rather similar (Borik/González/Verkuyl 2004; ten Cate 2004). In Table 1, four temporal-aspectual operators are used: PRES for marking of the present tense, PAST for marking of a past event. POST stands for an event posterior to a reference time, PERF stands for a completion of the event. As we can see German and Dutch have formal equivalences for all relevant tense forms.

**Table 1:** Tense operators for Dutch and German (adapted from Borik/González/Verkuyl 2004)

Present	Past
PRES D: Ik schrijf een brief. G: Ich schreibe einen Brief. 'I write a letter'	PAST D: Ik schreef een brief. G: Ich schrieb einen Brief. 'I wrote a letter'
PRES(POST) D: Ik zal een brief schrijven. G: Ich werde einen Brief schreiben. 'I will write a letter'	PAST(POST) D: Ik zou een brief schrijven. G: <i>Ich würde einen Brief schreiben.</i> <sup>12</sup> 'I would write a letter'

<sup>11</sup> However, these features can be organised in different language-specific ways within the lexicon.

<sup>12</sup> The German versions are presented in italics, as this form usually conveys a conditional reading. Only in some specific context (e.g. indirect speech) it can denote a future in the past. This difference does not have any relevance for the argumentation here.

Present	Past
PRES(PERF) D: Ik heb een brief geschreven. G: Ich habe einen Brief geschrieben. 'I have written a letter'	PAST(PERF) D: Ik had een brief geschreven. G: Ich hatte einen Brief geschrieben. 'I had written a letter'
PRES(POST)(PERF) D: Ik zal een brief geschreven hebben. G: Ich werde einen Brief geschrieben haben. 'I will have written a letter'	PAST(POST)(PERF) D: Ik zou een brief geschreven hebben. G: <i>Ich würde einen Brief geschrieben haben.</i> 'I will have written a letter'

Although on the formal side, the verb systems appear almost entirely alike, some of these similarities are only superficial and do not correspond to the use of the forms.

### 2.2.3.1 Dutch<sup>13</sup>

As a Germanic language, Dutch is strongly “tense-oriented” (Broekhuis/Corver/Vos 2015). However, it has a few aspectual phenomena. The distinction between the Simple Past form and the Present Perfect form could be understood as aspectual (Borik/González/Verkuyl 2004), as the simple past is imperfective in nature and the present perfect acts as both perfect and perfective, depending on the context. In (10) there is a simple past with an habitual (hence imperfective) reading and in (11) the perfect form is used with a perfective meaning (Van Hout 2005):

- (10) Ik las altijd veel boeken. (Simple Past)  
 I read.PAST always many books  
 'I always read many books.'
- (11) Ik heb gisteren honderd emails gelezen. (Present Perfect)  
 I have yesterday hundred emails read.PARTICIPLE  
 'Yesterday I read a hundred emails.'
- (12) Ik heb vandaag drie kilometer gelopen. (Present Perfect)  
 I have today three kilometres run.PARTICIPLE  
 'Today I have run three kilometres.'

<sup>13</sup> This section is an adaptation of a similar section at González/Verkuyl (2017).

As shown in (11) and (12), the Present Perfect can have, both a perfect and a perfective reading, depending on the context. In (11) the Perfect is used in a pre-diurnal context (yesterday), where traditionally one would expect only a perfective form.<sup>14</sup> In (12) we find the more traditional and default use of the perfect, in a past situation where the temporal domain is still valid at the moment of speech (today).

Moreover, Dutch has a progressive construction, as shown in (13). It is “used to refer to some eventuality during speech time” (Broekhuis/Corver/Vos 2015: 151). This description is based on the progressive construction with a present tense auxiliary but can also be applied to its past tense counterpart.

(13) Ik was koffie aan het drinken.  
 I was coffee at the drink.INF  
 ‘I was drinking coffee.’

(14) Ik zat koffie te drinken  
 I sat koffie to drink.INF  
 ‘I was drinking coffee’

Sentence (14) with the verb ‘sit’ in auxiliary position, is actually more accepted with the reading of progressive, or even with a habitual sense.

### 2.2.3.2 German

In German, the most important past tenses in terms of usage frequency are the Present Perfect and the Simple Past. Although, given their morphology, they seem similar to the corresponding tenses in Dutch (and even in Spanish), there are some clear differences in their use. In the research literature there is a debate as to whether these tense forms carry different aspectual features. In fact, it is disputed in the literature whether there is any grammatical aspect at all in German (see e.g. Schwenk 2012).

Recent investigations indicate that the verb forms do not express aspectual contrasts but carry rather stylistic features (Heinold 2015). Generally, the Perfect is regarded as more colloquial and is preferred in the spoken language, whereas the Simple Past – sometimes also referred to as Imperfect or Preterit (see Vater 2010 for terminological questions) – occurs in more formal contexts and is

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<sup>14</sup> It is noteworthy that, as in other European languages such as French, Italian (Romance) or German (Germanic), adverbial phrases such like *gisteren* ‘yesterday’, referring to temporal intervals preceding speech time, are used in Present Perfect constructions.

reserved for written texts. What is essential for the purpose of this chapter is that, at least in colloquial language, an interchange of the forms does not lead to a change of meaning, but simply reflects another style.

To give an example, the sentence '*She was watching TV when she received the call*' can be translated in four different ways:

- |      |     |                  |      |     |           |               |
|------|-----|------------------|------|-----|-----------|---------------|
| (15) | Sie | sah fern,        | als  | sie | den Anruf | bekam.        |
|      | She | watch TV-PRET    | when | she | the call  | get-PRET      |
| (16) | Sie | hat ferngesehen, | als  | sie | den Anruf | bekommen hat. |
|      | She | watch TV-PERF,   | when | she | the call  | get-PERF      |
| (17) | Sie | hat ferngesehen, | als  | sie | den Anruf | bekam.        |
|      | She | watch TV-PERF,   | when | she | the call  | get-PRET      |
| (18) | Sie | sah fern,        | als  | sie | den Anruf | bekommen hat. |
|      | She | watch TV-PRET    | when | she | the call  | get-PERF      |

Whereas (15) is a common sentence in colloquial language, (16) sounds rather formal. The other two sentences can be classified as somewhere in between formal and informal use. Although there are some dialectal differences regarding which alternative is the most preferred one, what is crucial for our analysis is that there are no semantic distinctions whatsoever (Heinold 2015). Contrasts such as perfectivity must be expressed through lexical means if the context requires to do so. These means can consist of the use of another verb with a different lexical aspect, or of adding temporal adverbs, particles or non-standardized periphrases. Such a periphrasis, for instance, is found in the progressive form *Ich bin am Lesen* 'I am reading'. However, this form is not comparable to the Dutch Progressive in (13) (Andersson 1989; Krause 1997) as it is regionally restricted and highly stigmatized from a normative point of view (Thiel 2008).

In sum, it is reasonable to conclude that German verb forms have no morphological means to express aspect. This renders the German grammar, in that matter, significantly different from other Germanic languages, such as English and Dutch where a basic aspectual contrast is still available. The concurring past forms are only marked for tense and, although they may differ in style, are generally interchangeable. Interestingly, this observation extends even to auxiliary verbs, such that the pluperfect *Ich hatte angerufen* can be expressed as *Ich habe angerufen gehabt* 'I have had telephoned', a form which, despite its exceptional status, in the German tense system is frequently used in the spoken language (see Duden 2009).

**Table 2:** Summary of interlinguistic differences regarding grammatical aspect

Spanish	Consequent marking of grammatical aspect within the past tense
Dutch	Some aspectual contrasts (habituality, progressivity)
German	Grammatical aspect is not marked morphologically

### 2.2.4 Comparison

This chapter pursues the idea that theoretically motivated discussions about the properties of the tense-aspect system have an immediate relevance when it comes to L2 learning. Although the differences between German and Dutch might seem rather subtle, we sustain that they lead to significantly different patterns when comparing German speaking and Dutch-speaking learners of a language in which grammatical aspect plays a major role, such as Spanish. Our innovative angle is thus to show that by looking at the interlanguage of L2 learners of different L1s, we can gain insight into how the different L1s organize grammatical information.

Undoubtedly, the Romance languages have a richer aspect system than the Germanic languages. If, for instance, a Spanish sentence needs a translation in which no information is being lost, lexical elements (adverbs, particles, etc.) must be used to make the aspectual contrasts explicit. In that regard, Germanic verb forms are underspecified (Sánchez Prieto 2011). Regarding inherent aspect, on the other hand, there are no major differences between the three languages presented here.

Nonetheless, the presentation of the different verb systems in the sections above has shown that the Germanic languages do not represent a homogeneous group either. Whereas Dutch contains a basic aspectual notion in its tense system, we derive that German has no such notion at all (see Table 2). Although in direct translations from one language to the other this difference is in most cases negligible, we argue that, nevertheless, it leads to significantly distinct representations which, in a L2 learning context, turn out to be significant. Whereas a German-speaking learner of Spanish as L2 is faced with a completely new category (i.e. perfectivity), a learner with Dutch as L1 already has a vague idea since in Dutch there are perfect forms with perfective meanings and a progressive construction, i.e. the concept that verbal morphology can carry meaning of grammatical aspect is already familiar.

An appropriate concept to formalize the subtle differences can be derived from micro- and macro-parameters in the generativist framework (see Kayne

2005). The general idea that language acquisition can be accounted for via the concept of parametric differences (Chomsky 1995) has changed over the years, so that nowadays the focus lies rather on the acquisition of features (see e.g. Hwang/Lardiere 2013). For instance, in the case of the Spanish past tense forms, Domínguez/Arche/Myles (2017) define four features as relevant: [ $\pm$ perfective], [ $\pm$ continuous], [ $\pm$ habitual] and [ $\pm$ progressive].

An alternative conceptualization of microparameters is proposed by Roberts (2014) who suggests that parameters are actually organized hierarchically. According to this view, the term macro-parameter is nothing more than a set of several micro-parameters sharing similar properties. In the context of grammatical aspect, this can be understood in terms of the following: on a micro-level, we can ask if a given aspectual feature is reflected by a grammatical marker in the given language. The set of all aspectual markers, then, corresponds to the macro-parameter. Applying this notion to the languages treated in this chapter, German differs from both Spanish and Dutch on a macro-parametrical level, since there is no marking of grammatical aspect at all. Comparing Spanish and Dutch, on the other hand, although both languages have grammatical aspect markers, they differ in terms of micro-parameters. Spanish requires the consequent marking of perfectivity, whereas in Dutch there is only grammaticalized expression of progressivity and a basic aspectual contrast in the different past tenses (see also Salaberry/Ayoum 2005 for similar arguments on English).

In the next section, we will review findings of empirical studies which support the proposed approach.

## 3 Consequences for L2 Learners

### 3.1 Background

In the context of acquiring the aspectual system of Spanish as an L2, the main task for speakers of Germanic languages consists of considering the marking of (im)perfectivity<sup>15</sup> in Spanish and of understanding the consequences of the contrast to German forms. As argued above, Dutch and German-speaking learners have different starting points which may affect their sensitivity to grammatical aspect as a general notion.

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<sup>15</sup> And in a way, also the Perfect, although it is not part of the main argument presented here.

According to research in several branches of linguistics, great differences between the L1 and the L2 may hinder the acquisition of the latter, whereas similarities can have an accelerating effect. Within the generativist framework, for instance, one important approach assumes the *Feature Reassembly Hypothesis* (Hwang/Lardiere 2013). This hypothesis poses that SLA is broken down into a continuous task of reorganization of features, starting with L1 configuration. The more differences there are in how formal features are mapped to grammatical forms, the more difficulties arise for the learner. Consequently, the learning process is significantly slower in comparison to learners who start from a L1 with fewer differences to the target system. During the reconfiguration process, it is argued that a rule-based competing system can take over which is constructed consciously and deduced directly from pedagogical input (Rothman 2008).

L1-effects are also discussed within the usage-based approach to L2 acquisition where tense-aspect phenomena are a highly investigated research subject (see Bardovi-Harlig 2000 for an overview). In such studies, the focus is more on *how* (i.e. in which steps) a grammatical competence is achieved than on *why* this behaviour occurs.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, the L1 effect is not supported by all researchers. For instance, Ayoun/Salaberry (2008) claim that it is irrelevant for non-complex phenomena, and Gabriele/McClure (2011) even state that only the complexity of a given phenomenon itself, not the difference with the corresponding L1 property, determines the degree of difficulty in acquiring it (see Domínguez/Arche/Myles 2017 for a review). The acquisition of the tense-aspect system in Romance languages represents a promising testing ground for a deeper investigation of these issues, as it is characterized both by a high complexity and by a large cross-linguistic variation, as seen above.

Many researchers (e.g. Housen 2000; Izquierdo/Collins 2008, just to name a few) found that in precisely such cases even the most proficient learners do not follow native-like patterns if their L1 differs significantly from the target language. More concretely, instead of choosing a verb form based on grammatical aspect, they rely on lexical features (more details in section 3.2). A general observation is that the greater the L1-L2 differences are, the more the learners rely on such learning strategies (Izquierdo/Collins 2008: 352).

The dissociation of grammatical and inherent aspect turns out to be the main task for learners of Romance languages as L2 and has often been argued

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<sup>16</sup> According to Rothman (2008), this is a general disadvantage in comparison to more formal approaches. In this chapter, we will combine several approaches without similarly rigorous judgements.



to be the main source of difficulties (Andersen 1986, 1991; Salaberry 2008). Importantly, most of the evidence supporting those arguments is based on English-speaking learners. Other Germanic languages, such as German and Dutch remain rather understudied. This yields opportunities for further research since the English tense-aspect system is not identical to one of the systems described in 2.1.2. McManus (2015) found that English and German-speaking learners of French as L2 behave very differently, proven by an experimental study among 75 participants with a comparable proficiency level of French: whereas in habitual contexts, both groups showed notable difficulties with the past tenses, the English-speaking group outperformed the Germans in progressive contexts. This result is directly relatable to the L1 of the learners, since contrary to German, English has a grammaticalized Progressive. McManus (2015) concludes that such differences between the L1 and the L2 can affect the way in which grammatical contrast are acquired and processed.

In the following sections we take a similar approach. By comparing Dutch and German learners from previous empirical studies, a clear difference between the two groups is posited. We argue that the only possibility to explain the differences in the L2 data is by considering that the Dutch and the German tense-aspect systems are clearly different, in other words, we are faced with a clear L1 effect.

## 3.2 Previous studies

### 3.2.1 Research overview

There are only a few studies tackling the specific combination of German or Dutch as L1 and Spanish as L2. Known exceptions often do not focus on the specific Germanic languages and their properties but compare speakers of different languages with each other to argue in favour of a general L1 effect (Díaz/Bel/Bekiou 2008). Generally, the most studied L1 in research on the acquisition of the Spanish tense-aspect system is undoubtedly English (see Comajoan 2014 for a review). Furthermore, when German speakers are included in studies, the most frequent language which is investigated is also English, then as L2 (e.g. von Stutterheim/Carrol/Klein 2009).

Thorough research on English-speaking learners of grammatical aspect in an L2 has brought about many specific hypotheses. For instance, according to the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen 1986, 1991), which uses Vendler's four-way partition, learners establish a relationship between lexical aspect and the grammatical form: state verbs are initially only marked with the Imperfect, whereas achievements appear with the Preterit. During the learning process,

other combinations are sequentially acquired, but the lexical aspect always determines the order. Another proposal is found in the Default Past Tense Hypothesis (Salaberry 2008), which states that beginners use only one past tense (most times, the Preterit) for all past events regardless of their aspectual features. Although both hypotheses were based on data from Anglophone learners, their original formulation does not necessarily suggest a dependence on properties of English. It is hence unclear if a universality is intended, i.e., more research is necessary.

As mentioned above, McManus (2015) showed that English-speaking and German-speaking learners behave significantly differently. We therefore sustain that a comparison between speakers of different Germanic L1s is necessary. Contrary to McManus (2015), however, we will not focus on French<sup>17</sup> as the target language for the following reasons: Although the French tense-aspect-system presents almost the same perfectivity contrast as the Spanish one, research findings are not directly transferable.

The Imperfect is similar in both languages (Amenós-Pons 2015), but in contrast to Spanish, the default past tense form for the perfective aspect in French, especially in spoken language, is the analytical Present Perfect, whereas the synthetic Preterit (*Passé Simple*) is outmoded by a clear reduction in its uses (Labeau 2005). In current French, the perfectivity distinction is thus manifested in a contrast between a compound form and a simple form, namely between the Imperfect and the Present Perfect. In a L2 context, this leads to a higher vulnerability for transfer, because the Dutch or German-speaking learners could easily establish a connection between the morphologically similar tense forms in their mother tongue. In Spanish, this connection is significantly less evident, since here the opposition is between two simple forms: Imperfect and Preterit.<sup>18</sup> A transfer based on morphological similarities thus cannot occur.

Precisely for that reason, we are convinced that the focus on Spanish as L2 is important to see how transfer in the domain of tense and aspect with a Germanic language as L1 works. Since an orientation at the surface level is not possible, the learner is forced to concentrate on meaning. In the next sections we will show that this is indeed what happens, although neither the reported German-speaking learners nor the Dutch ones appear to achieve a native-like competence. In both cases, a compensating learning strategy (i.e., the explicit application of rule-based decisions, see Hawkins/Chan 1997) is developed to handle

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<sup>17</sup> In fact, the combination of German and French has already been researched in more detail (see Rieckborn 2007).

<sup>18</sup> And possibly Perfect in some dialects, as an attentive reviewer pointed out.

the contrast. These strategies partially fulfil their compensating function and produce some target-like patterns. In other contexts, they lead to non-expected behaviour. Since the strategies are noticeably different, we will conclude that this observation is a direct consequence of the differences between the two systems involved.

Given the lack of concrete studies that feature German and Dutch speakers together, we will report on previous L2 findings of where both learner groups were analysed separately. Although some of the following has been reported by us elsewhere, what is new here are the conclusions drawn from the contrast between these studies.

### 3.2.2 Findings on German as L1

In a study embedded in the generativist framework, Diaubalick/Guijarro-Fuentes (2016) tested the interpretation and production of the past tense forms by 71 German learners with different proficiency levels of Spanish as L2 (intermediate to advanced). Using a Grammaticality Judgment Task in combination with a Sentence Completion Task, it has been shown that there was no direct transfer on a morphological level, i.e., the Spanish Present Perfect was not overgeneralized. That is, learners have successfully understood the fact that the most frequent forms are the synthetic ones: Imperfect and Preterit.

However, a comparison with a control group showed that the learners behaved significantly differently from L1 Spanish speakers. Although for standard contexts (i.e. prototypical contexts), a developmental effect was visible, in more complex uses of the past tenses (where inherent and grammatical aspect differ), the data showed persisting difficulties in the learners. In such cases, an explicit learning mechanism became visible which had a clear compensating function: in cases of doubt, learners relied on temporal adverbs when choosing between one or the other verb form. Whereas this effect was directly visible in the production task, it also led to a clear effect on how items of the Grammaticality Judgement Task were evaluated.

Temporal markers are often taught in courses of Spanish as foreign language and appear as a rule-of-thumb in textbooks (Salaberry 2008). The adverbial *la semana pasada* 'last week', for instance, locates a past event in a completed context and hence usually coappears with the Preterit. Diaubalick/Guijarro-Fuentes (2016) showed that in precisely those contexts where such a known marker is to be combined with the non-expected form (e.g. *la semana pasada* and an Imperfect), significant differences between the learners and the control group arise.

To confirm these patterns, a subsequent study was conducted following a usage-based approach (Diaubalick/Guijarro-Fuentes 2017), where German learners are contrasted with speakers of other L1s (French, Italian, Portuguese). A total of 131 non-native speakers participated in the study. The results show that none of the common hypotheses of the usage-based approach presented above (Lexical Aspect Hypothesis, Default Past Tense Hypothesis) could be entirely confirmed. Instead, individual variables such as learning background must be considered among which the most prominent one was the learner's L1.

### 3.2.3 Findings on Dutch as L1

González (2003, 2013) and González/Quintana Hernández (2018) collected data on the acquisition of past tense forms by Dutch learners. In González (2003), 17 Dutch classroom L2 learners of Spanish following a beginner's course took part in an experiment, where data were collected through standardised tests (filling the blanks and multiple choice). In González/Quintana Hernández (2018), 31 Dutch classroom L2 learners of Spanish following a A2 level course took part in another experiment, where data were collected through a written production task.

There are striking differences in the results of both experiments. These can be summarized as follows: in both studies, it is shown that the Spanish Preterit was the preferred form. In those cases where the Imperfective appeared, it was more often with durative predications, whereas the Preterit occurred more often with terminative predications. There was a clear superposition of inherent aspect in Dutch onto the choice of past tense forms in their L2. In other words, when a predication was terminative, as in '*read the letter*', the past L2 production would be with the Preterit (*leyó la carta*); when a predication was durative, as in '*be hungry*', the past L2 production would be with the Imperfect (*tenía hambre*). These types of constructions were found in both standardised tests and in free production data. In both cases the results were significant.

The main conclusion concerning these results is that the use of a past tense form is influenced by the inherent aspect of the predication the learners want to produce in their interlanguage. In the second study (2018), the Present Perfect appears constantly in the informants' interlanguage. The studies on Dutch learners also lead to two important conclusions: first, free production tasks cannot be treated in the same way as standardised tests, where a clear choice is given to the informants. So, as van den Bergh/Rijklaarsdam (1999: 13) state: 'the nature of writing processes is recursive and dynamic: different sub processes can and do

occur at any moment during the process'. Secondly, the overuse of the Perfect can be explained as L1 transfer (see section 3.3.1).

### 3.3 Summary and comparison

What this brief survey of previous studies has shown, is that both Dutch and German-speaking learners of Spanish as L2 show evident target-deviate patterns in the use and interpretation of past tenses. However, the deviations occur in very different ways, as we will show in the next section.

Applying the idea by McManus (2015) that the nature of the aspectual contrast needs to be in the focus of the investigation, it can be observed that the *manner in which* target-deviations occur are strikingly different. That is, although both learner groups fail to acquire the target system completely, they differ significantly in *how* this type of error<sup>19</sup> manifests itself. In Spanish, the selection of an appropriate past tense form requires the consideration of the global context that defines the aspectual properties of the sentence. As the studies have shown, learners do not carry out this process entirely. In both cases, the studies seem to have detected compensating mechanisms based on explicitly learned rules that the learners develop to overcome the difficulties in processing the aspectual features in a target-like fashion. The learning strategies are based on radically simplified patterns, and it is precisely here where the differences are located: whereas German learners base their strategy on lexical elements, such as temporal adverbials, Dutch learners rely on inherent aspect (durativity and terminativity clues).

These differences lead to a diagonally inverse behaviour in some contexts. Comparing the results of Diaubalick/Guijarro-Fuentes (2016, 2017) with González (2003, 2013), German-speaking learners display a target-deviant behaviour when adverbials are misleading, whereas Dutch learners, in those sentences where inherent and grammatical aspect diverge, do not behave target-like even when the adverbials are facilitating.

The finding that temporal markers affect learners' behaviour is not new and has in fact been shown in numerous studies. Rothman (2008) claims that the pedagogical rules taught in class are applied in a stronger way than the learner's own intuitions. Nonetheless, the findings reported here are different in some significant points from previous studies. For instance, the Dutch learners have

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<sup>19</sup> We are aware of the negative connotations carried by this expression (see e.g. Cook 1997). It is our aim to simply attest a difference between the target system and the learners' interlanguage.

shown that a helpful adverbial is not always considered, which is counterevidence for Rothman's (2008) claim that the reliance on trigger words will overwrite the reliance on temporal markers. Furthermore, according to Baker/Quesada (2011), who base their arguments on findings concerning Anglophone learners, the effect exercised by temporal adverbials is generally weaker than the reliance on inherent aspect, which contrasts with the findings among the German learners presented above. Additionally, the effect was visible both in the interpretation and the production tasks. As a conclusion, it is safe to say that German learners base their decision on temporal markers which does not nullify an acquired competence, but rather compensates for the lack of it. For the Dutch group, these patterns were not observed.

The role of the temporal markers is therefore crucial for the following argumentation, and can best be illustrated by sentences, in which inherent aspect and temporal markers do not trigger the same tense; that is, where the elements can be regarded as contradicting evidence.

Consider the following example (taken from the multiple-choice task of González 2003):

- (19) Ayer {pasaba/pasé} un rato en el café donde  
 Yesterday spend.IMP/PRET one while in the cafe where  
 Nuria {tomaba/tomó} el desayuno todos los domingos.  
 Nuria take.IMP/PRET the breakfast all the Sundays.  
 'Yesterday I spent some time at the coffee house where Nuria had her  
 breakfast every Sunday.'

In this case, *ayer* 'yesterday' is a known marker of the Preterit, whereas *todos los domingos* 'every Sunday' occurs mostly with the Imperfect. Considering this, the tense forms to be chosen should be first *pasé* (Preterit) and then *tomaba* (Imperfect). Given the context of the two events, this would be the expected answer. Conversely, the inherent lexical aspect of the two given predications in (18) hint in the opposite direction. Whereas *pasar un rato* 'to spend some time' is a durative predicate, *tomar el desayuno* 'have breakfast' is a terminative one. If the learning strategy is based on the correlation durativity-Imperfect, terminativity-Preterit, the learner would choose *pasaba* and *tomó*, that is, the opposite from what we would first expect.

In (19), thus, the use of the temporal markers gives a helpful cue, whereas the reliance on inherent aspect leads to target-deviant answers. This explanation does not always apply, because in Spanish inherent aspect, lexical marker and the actual grammatical context (i.e., the (im)perfectivity of the verb phrase) are entirely independent. As shown in the studies above, a temporal marker is not

always helpful, but can be misleading. This is the case, when an adverbial indicating completeness appears in an imperfective context, or if an adverbial of durativity appears with a bounded event. Likewise, the inherent aspect can coincide with the grammatical one, but does not necessarily have to.

Only the grammatical context determines the verb form, so by maintaining the terminology of *helpful* vs. *misleading*<sup>20</sup>, we can categorize the possible combinations into four types:

- i. Helpful marker and helpful inherent aspect
  - a. In a perfective context: Preterit marker and terminative predicate
  - b. In an imperfective context: Imperfect marker and durative predicate
  
- ii. Helpful marker and misleading inherent aspect
  - a. In a perfective context: Preterit marker, but durative predicate
  - b. In an imperfective context: Imperfect marker, but terminative predicate
  
- iii. Misleading marker and helpful inherent aspect
  - a. In a perfective context: Imperfect marker, though terminative predicate
  - b. In an imperfective context: Preterit marker, though durative predicate
  
- iv. Misleading marker and misleading inherent aspect
  - a. In a perfective context: Imperfect marker and durative predicate
  - b. In an imperfective context: Preterit marker and terminative predicate

The following examples for a perfective context (analogous arguments hold for the imperfective context), where the adverbials are marked in bold, illustrate the four types:

- i. **Ayer**            llegué            a    Londres.  
    Yesterday    I-arrive.PRET    at    London.  
    ‘Yesterday I arrived in London’ (Preterit marker, terminative predicate)

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<sup>20</sup> As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, another possible terminology here would be prototypical/non-prototypical. Given that these terms, however, are also tightly connected to the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis (see e.g. Bardovi-Harlig 2000: 218; Salaberry 2008: 14), we opted for the use of less prejudiced terms which, at the same time, reflect the deviations between explicit rule-based learning and the acquisition of the underlying aspectual contrasts.

- ii. **Ayer** caminé por el parque.  
 Yesterday I-walk.PRET through the park.  
 ‘Yesterday I walked in the park’ (Preterit marker, durative predicate)
- iii. **En mi infancia** abandoné mi patria.  
 In my childhood I-leave.PRET my fatherland.  
 ‘I left my homeland during my childhood’ (Imperfect marker, terminative predicate)
- iv. **Siempre** tuve buenos amigos.  
 Always I-have.PRET good friends.  
 ‘I always had good friends’ (Imperfect marker, durative predicate)

Importantly, observing various combinations of items of the four types offer a methodological advantage, since they can reveal different learning strategies without having to contrast the learners’ production to that of L1 speakers. Thus, the risk of a high subjectivity (which plays a major role in grammatical aspect; see Salaberry 2008) can be avoided.

This consideration is the key to the comparison of the studies mentioned earlier. Precisely in those cases where only one element is helpful and the other element is misleading, German-speaking and Dutch-speaking learners behave diagonally differently. That is, Dutch learners seem to adhere to inherent aspect (González 2003, 2013), whereas German speakers focus their attention on adverbs (Diaubalick/Guijarro-Fuentes 2017; Diaubalick forthcoming).

The striking differences derived from the studies are summarized in the following table, revealing the distinct learning mechanisms:

**Table 3:** Summary of previous results on SLA of L2 Spanish aspect by Dutch and German learners

Results according to the relation between temporal adverbial, inherent aspect and target form.	‘helpful marker’	‘misleading marker’
‘helpful inherent aspect’	Advanced learners of both L1 groups perform on a native-like level	German speakers diverge from native group
‘misleading inherent aspect’	Dutch speakers diverge from native group	Both learner groups diverge from native speakers



### 3.4 Discussion and conclusion

The comparison of the studies above suggests that the interlanguages of Dutch and German-speaking learners of Spanish differ considerably from each other. While it is true that the participants of the different studies were not on the same level of Spanish, in no study it was found that an augmenting proficiency would lead to crucially different learning patterns. The most probable reason for the observed differences between the groups thus lies in the L1-effect. Although this is an attempt to explain the differences between groups, we believe that the empirical data supports our argument. Future studies could address the question of why this effect manifests itself as it does. That is, we need to clarify two issues:

- (I) Why do Dutch-speaking learners base their selection on inherent aspect, ignoring occasionally even helpful lexical triggers?
- (II) Why do German-speaking learners behave in the opposite way, (i.e., why do misleading markers lead to target-deviant structures), and why don't they follow inherent aspect clues, even if in some cases this would lead to a target-like behaviour?

In both constellations, learners seem to have developed learning strategies which arguably serve to compensate difficulties with the acquisition of contrasting aspectual clues. Of course, it is likely that pedagogical input has led to the use of such strategies (see Cadierno 2000; Rothman 2008 for a defence of that position). Many text books of Spanish offer long lists of temporal markers (known as *Signalwörter* 'signal word' in Germany) based on which instructors deliberately try to simplify the complex selection task a learner must face.

However, it is important to note that didactic traditions cannot be the main reason for the peculiarity of the German group, as similar instruction methods are also present in the Netherlands (and other countries world-wide), whereas the concept of inherent aspect, in contrast, is rarely mentioned (González 2008). Thus, the mere assumption that learners behave as they do as a result of pedagogical methods cannot explain why Dutch-speaking learners base their learning strategy on a non-taught element, and even ignore markers in helpful contexts. A possible explanation for this fact is that Dutch learners of Spanish rely on their own aspectual clues (in this case inherent aspect) and apply them to the Spanish grammatical aspect contrast.

In sum, pedagogical input cannot be the only explanation for the observed results. Since the learners in the studies presented here are generally comparable as to their age and education level (all participants are university students aged (insert average age)), the L1 seems to be an important factor that clearly distin-

guishes the groups. We hence argue that the different learning patterns are likely to be due to subtle differences in the grammars of German and Dutch. But, how can the different L1-effects be explained by pure linguistic data?

It is here where the concept of micro- and macroparameters based on Roberts (2014) comes into play (recall section 2.1.4). As we have argued, the differences between German and Spanish on the one hand (macroparametric) and between Dutch and Spanish on the other hand (microparametric), are inherently diverse which logically amounts to saying that Dutch and German cannot be equivalent in their tense-aspect systems. This explains the behaviour of the learners investigated in the studies. Due to the basic aspectual encoding in their native language, Dutch learners are aware of the concept of grammatical aspect and so they know that it can be relevant for expressing a perspective or viewpoint. This seems to have a positive outcome for their sensitivity for aspectual markers in general. Although they do not achieve native-like competence for the organization of aspect in L2 Spanish (as their selection is not based on the notion of perfectivity), their learning strategy is indisputably based on aspect. The only “error”<sup>21</sup>, then, is that they choose inherent aspect instead of the grammatical one. This provides insight into issue (I) discussed at the beginning of this section.

German learners, in contrast, do not consider any aspectual notion, i.e., their choice is neither based on grammatical nor on inherent features. Instead, the developed learning strategy is based on surface structure elements such as temporal adverbials. This is explainable by the lack of grammatical aspect in German which hinders the consideration of aspectual information at all, which is why the learners behave as stated in (II).

This explanation, in turn, allows to confirm the assumed properties of the German and the Dutch tense and aspect system and thus shows how the investigation of SLA can contribute to linguistic theory. The assumptions adopted here are compatible with our data: whereas the Dutch grammar features an aspectual contrast that simply does not coincide with the Spanish one, German<sup>22</sup> does not possess grammatical aspect features at all. That is, an interchange of the competing tense forms in German does not change the aspectual content of a sentence but is merely related to stylistic factors. In contrast to Dutch, a progressive form is neither grammaticalized nor consistently used (Krause 1997). The subtle differences, which

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**21** The reason for our use of quotation marks in this context relates to the comment above. We do not want to deny a systematicity to the learners’ interlanguage, but simply attest a deviation from the native-like system.

**22** This affirmation concerns of course the spoken language from where a learner could possibly start with a transfer.

in direct translation between German and Dutch have little consequences, cause major inconsistencies in SLA of Spanish.

Different from what Housen (2000) and Izquierdo/Collins (2008) state as a general conclusion, we have not found clear evidence that a greater L1-L2 differences leads to a higher reliance on inherent aspect features. On the contrary, the German learners presented in the studies above did not seem to rely on aspectual features at all, although the L1-L2 difference is the largest one in this case. We can therefore conclude that the reliance can only take place if the learners are aware of the concept of (grammatical) aspect at all. This is only the case when the L1 contains at least basic contrast, as in the grammars of English or Dutch.

The comparison of different SLA studies has shown how empirical data in an applied field can be used to contribute important evidence for linguistic analysis. Future research should validate these arguments with the support from more experimental data on the subject both from a theoretical and from an applied point of view. The main conclusion drawn from the results presented above is that the Dutch and the German verb system differ in the grammaticalization of aspect and that this claim can explain the differences in behaviour of learners of L2 Spanish.

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