

Complexity and Distance in the Acquisition of the English Resultative Construction by Spanish Speakers of EFL

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This study reports two empirical tests designed to identify properties of the acquisition of the English Resultative Construction (ERC) by Spanish speakers learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The underlying question of those tests refers to whether the different subtypes of ERC – structures with no mirror image in Spanish- are learned at different stages correlated with different levels of proficiency. In addition, we contrasted the acquisition of the English Depictive Construction –that do have a mirror image in Spanish- in order to assess whether the knowledge of L1 has any bearing on that order of acquisition. Our results confirm that, first, the existence of a ‘natural’ sequence of acquisition of the different ERC types and, second, L1 –and not only proficiency- has a role in such order. Our claim is that the intrinsic complexity of each ERC type (Complexity hypothesis) together with their relative distance from Spanish (Distance hypothesis) are the two mutually consistent factors that set the sequence of acquisition.

Sentence (1) represents the ERC subtype ‘property’. The main verb is an activity that is monovalent but it has an Undergoer argument that is not part of the Logical Structure of the verb. In addition, an AP describes the result of the activity, which consists of a final state of the Undergoer. The two predicates constitute a complex one via a nuclear juncture (Van Valin, 2005).

(1) Mary danced John tired.

ERC is crucially consistent with the fact that English is a satellite-framed language. In contrast, Spanish is a verb-framed language and, thus, it lacks a mirror image of ERC. (1) can be expressed by (2)

(2) Mary dejó cansado a John de tanto bailar
Mary let tired to John of so-much dance
“Mary left John tired from so much dancing”

In order to answer the questions mentioned above, we conducted two online experiments: A Reading Comprehension Task and an Acceptability Judgement Task. We singled out three ERC subtypes that differ in their syntax-semantic interface properties: ERC-Path, ERC-Property and ERC-Fake Reflexive. In addition, we included the English Depictive Construction (EDC) as part of the critical data set since both languages present depictive constructions. Results show clear differences in the comprehension of the different ERC subtypes and EDC in relation to the proficiency level of the students. We entertain two hypotheses: Complexity and Distance. On the one hand, Complexity claims that the number of grammatical interface properties establish a

hierarchy of ERC subtypes that determines the rate of acquisition. In contrast, Distance claims that this order derives from the relative distance of each subtype to the Spanish event construction style. Both Complexity and Distance make the same predictions for the order of acquisition of ERC subtypes -i.e., ERC-Path < ERC-P < ERC-F- but only Distance accounts for the acquisition of EDC within the cline.

References:

Van Valin, R. (2005). *Exploring the Syntax-Semantics Interface*. Cambridge: CUP