Evidence of Transfer: L2 Acquisition of Telicity in English by Spanish and Slavic Native Speakers*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the claim that the native grammar of the learners is the initial state of second language acquisition, as far as the acquisition of Universal Grammar parameters is concerned. Two opposing views on L1 transfer are discussed: the first hypothesis maintains that learners start out with the L1 parameter value (Schwartz & Sprouse's 1994, 1996 Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis) while the second hypothesis argues that L1 transfer plays no role in the acquisition process (Epstein, Flynn & Martohardjono 1996's Direct Access Hypothesis). The parameter under investigation is the Aspect Parameter, postulating two different ways in which languages mark telicity in the verbal phrase. The research design of the experimental study involves examining the competence of two groups of low intermediate learners of English, native speakers of Spanish, a language sharing the same parameter value with English, and of Bulgarian, a language exhibiting the opposite parametric value. Results indicate that the differences in the performance of learners from the two language groups are directly traceable to their native language. Thus the Full Transfer hypothesis receives experimental support.

0. Introduction

The general research question of this study addresses the nature of the initial grammar in second language (L2) acquisition. There is currently a lively debate in the L2 literature within the Principles and Parameters framework (Eubank 1993/4, 1996, Schwartz & Sprouse 1994, 1996, Vainikka & Young-Scholten 1994, 1996, Epstein, Flynn & Martohardjono 1996, White 1996) as to the role of the native language (L1). Although research on second language acquisition has been concerned with L1 transfer from the very beginning of its existence (see Gass 1996 for an overview and discussion), the productive discussion of this phenomenon is far from over. Most researchers in the field seem to agree with the fact that there is a non-trivial difference between L1 and L2 acquisition. L2 acquirers already have a grammar in place and this grammar influences the L2 acquisition process in some way. However, whether or not L1 transfer exists and what exactly constitutes transfer is still debated. For example, in the recently published collection of papers Flynn, Martohardjono & O'Neil (1998), one can find two opposing views on the problem. Schwartz (1998) argues for an Absolute L1 Influence hypothesis, whereby the initial state of L2 acquisition is the entire L1 grammar. Epstein, Flynn & Martohardjono (1998), on the other hand, propose that UG is directly accessed and "transfer is not part of the acquisition model itself" (Gair 1998: 80). I will call the latter position Direct Access to UG hypothesis. In a commentary on three of the papers in the collection, Gair makes some pertinent observations on what exactly can be interpreted as L1 transfer and what researchers should be careful not to confuse with transfer:

> "If, of course, further research were to reveal overt differences that could be clearly correlated with the L1s, it might constitute evidence for the instantiation of UG through L1, but those effects would have to be such as to be distinguishable from straightforward interference of some sort, or delay or failure in acquiring the L2 settings, which are not the same as, and should not be confused with, UG instantiation through L1." (Gair 1998:82)

* I am indebted to Silvina Montrul for arranging the testing in Argentina.

In the rest of the paper I will be looking at this old-standing problem in an area of L2 acquisition that has not been investigated so far, the acquisition of telicity marking in English.

1. The Parametric Distinction

Comparative theoretical studies of aspect (Smith 1991/1997, Slabakova 1997a,b,c) have proposed that there is a structural parametric distinction between English and Slavic with respect to aspect. In Slabakova (1997c) I tentatively discussed the Spanish facts and proposed that Spanish patterns with English as far as VP-level aspect (or situation aspect, see below) is concerned.

Smith (1991/1997) makes the important distinction between **viewpoint** aspect, reflected in grammatical "tense" morphemes (e.g. English simple and progressive tenses, Bulgarian imperfect and aorist tenses, Spanish preterite and imperfect tenses, see examples below); and **situation** aspect, the inherent lexical class of verbal predicates (Vendler's 1967 states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements).

Aspectual literature often makes use of the term 'telicity'. A clause is defined as **telic** if the situation it describes has a natural (inherent) endpoint, which has to be reached, and after which the situation cannot conceivably continue. A clause is defined as **atelic** if the situation it describes has no such endpoint. Thus, states and activities are atelic while accomplishments and achievements are telic. Here are some examples:

(1) a. John ran. ATELIC
b. John ran laps.
(2) John ran the marathon. TELIC

Consider the event described in (2). After all the 28 miles and 835 yards of the marathon distance have been covered by John, there is not a yard more that he can run that will be described by the sentence in (2). The situation has reached its inherent endpoint, measured out by the end of the marathon distance. In the case of the events encoded in (1), however, the running events can potentially continue indefinitely, and can be described as atelic.

Another useful distinction has to do with cardinality of DPs. A DP is of specified cardinality if its denotation can be exhaustively counted or measured. A DP is of unspecified cardinality if its denotation cannot be exhaustively counted or measured. Cardinality is orthogonal to definiteness, as the following examples demonstrate.

(3) an apple, three apples, the cake SPECIFIED CARDINALITY
(4) apples, cake UNSPECIFIED CARDINALITY

There are an overt definite and an optional indefinite article in Bulgarian. Thus the marking of cardinality parallels that in English (see (3)-(4) above):

(5) a. (edna) jabəlk-a, tri jabəlk-i, torta-ta SPECIFIED CARDINALITY
an apple three apple-s, cake-DET
b. jabəlk-i, torta UNSPECIFIED CARDINALITY
apple-s cake

The same is true of Spanish:

(6) a. una manzana, diez manzana-s, la torta — SPECIFIED CARDINALITY
an apple ten apple-s the cake
b. manzana-s, torta — UNSPECIFIED CARDINALITY
apple-s cake

Viewpoint versus Situation Aspect. The second aspectual distinction described by Smith 1991/1997 as viewpoint aspect has to do with the choice of the speaker how to present the event: from the outside as a complete whole, or from the inside as it is unfolding. As Comrie notes, aspectual tenses reflect "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (Comrie 1976: 3). For example, the English sentences in (7) differ in viewpoint aspect: they present the event as a bounded whole (7a), or as an event whose progress is viewed from within, with no indication of initial or final boundary (7b).

(7) a. Cordelia ate an apple. — BOUNDED
b. Cordelia was eating an apple. — UNBOUNDED

Every sentence in natural languages has to encode both viewpoint and situation aspect. The two aspectual distinctions obviously interact. The sentences in (7) both present a telic event with an inherent endpoint, although (7a) views this telic event as a bounded whole while (7b) views it as unbounded process.

The Spanish viewpoint aspect distinction is not exactly parallel to the English one. However, for the purposes of this study, we will leave these differences aside. I will come back to this contrast in aspectual tenses in the discussion section.

(8) a. Julieta practic-ó tenis. — BOUNDED
Juliet practice-3sS/PRET tennis
'Juliet did her tennis practice.' (...this morning, and is no longer playing)
b. Julieta practic-aba tenis. — UNBOUNDED
Juliet practice-3sS-IMP tennis
'Juliet practiced tennis. (she used to do it habitually)
'Juliet was practicing tennis. (...when I saw her, and may still be playing)

***The English Value of the VP-aspect Parameter*.** In English the verbal form itself does not indicate whether the event is telic or atelic. Verkuyl (1972, 1993) has argued convincingly that it is the cardinality of the nominal arguments that determines the interpretation. An object of specified cardinality brings forward a telic reading as in (9a). An object of unspecified cardinality indicates an atelic reading as in (9b).

(9) a. Claire ate an apple / the apple / three apples / a bag of popcorn — TELIC
b. Claire ate apples / popcorn. — ATELIC

***The Spanish Value*.** In Spanish, marking telicity also depends on the cardinality of the object (see Nishida 1994; Bonneau, Bruhn-Garavito and Libert 1994, 1995). The following Spanish examples demonstrate the importance of the object's cardinality for the aspectual interpretation.

(10) a. Juan comi-ó diez manzanas. TELIC
John eat-3sS/PRET ten apples
'John ate ten apples.'
b. Juan comi-ó manzanas ATELIC
John eat-3sS/PRET apples
'John ate apples.'

Like English, Spanish has an optional telicity marker beyond the cardinality of the object DP, that is the "reflexive" clitic *se* (Nishida 1994; Bonneau, Bruhn-Garavito and Libert 1994, 1995, Sanz 1996). The effect of this telic clitic is such that its presence is ungrammatical in a sentence with a dynamic verb and an unspecified cardinality object, i.e. an atelic sentence.

(11) a. Juan se comió un pollo
John CL eat-3sS/PRET a chicken
'John ate a chicken.'
b. *Juan se comió manzanas
John CL eat-3sS/PRET apples
'John ate apples.'

Thus the Spanish facts closely mirror the English facts reflected in (9a,b).

The Bulgarian Value. One might want to equate PVs in Slavic with English particles signalling a telic event, e.g. *up* in *drink up*, the only difference being that particles are optional while preverbs are not. Brinton (1988) argues that such particles are overt telicity markers in English. However, particles and preverbs have different scope effects over the object's cardinality. When perfective verbs combine with NPs of specified cardinality in Bulgarian, the event is of course interpreted as telic. English and Bulgarian are parallel in this respect (see 13a). But when perfective verbs combine with bare plural or mass NPs in Bulgarian, which should be equivalent in effect to English unspecified cardinality NPs, the event is still interpreted as telic. English and Bulgarian work differently now (see 13b).

(12) a. Toj na-pis-a^{P} tri pisma TELIC
He PV-write-3sS/AORIST three letters
'He wrote three letters.'
b. Toj na-pis-a^{P} pisma TELIC
He PV-write-3sS/AORIST letters
'He wrote letters.'

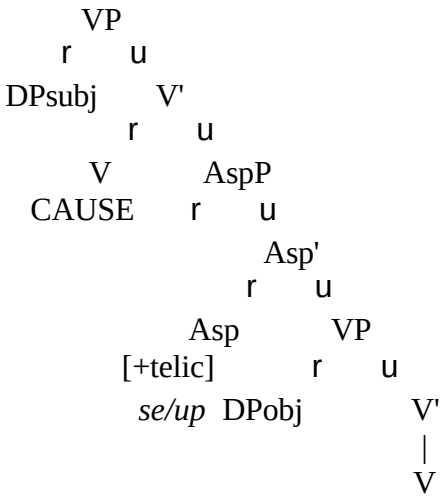
In English, perfective eventive verbs combined with bare plural or mass DPs result in an atelic interpretation, as discussed above (see (9b) and (10b)).

The Analysis. In capturing the Bulgarian versus English/Spanish distinction in phrase structure, I adopt the syntactic decomposition of eventive verbs approach, following Larson (1988), Pustejovsky (1991), Hale and Keyser (1993), and Travis (1991). The trees in (13a) and (13b) illustrate the proposed phrase markers for English and Bulgarian respectively. I follow the double VP structure proposed by Larson (1988) and adopt Travis's (1991) AspP between the two VPs as the place where accusative case on the object is checked. In English there is a null CAUSE morpheme in the head of the upper VP in a Larsonian VP shell structure (Hale and Keyser 1993, Pesetsky 1995). The telicity value is calculated in the head of AspP (Travis 1991) and depends

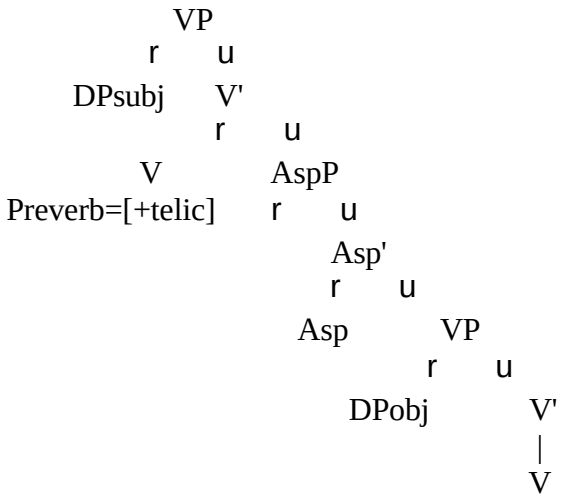
crucially on the object's cardinality.

In Slavic, on the other hand, the telic morpheme is overt, it is a lexical morpheme (usually a preverb) on the verb. It has merged in the lexicon with CAUSE, and together they occupy the upper V head, a position higher than the one in English. As a result, the cardinality of the object DP is not crucial for the telic or atelic interpretation.

(13) a. <u>English/Spanish</u>



b. <u>Slavic</u>



3. Hypotheses for SLA

The difference between (9a) and (9b) is almost never taught explicitly in language classrooms. It was hypothesized that L2 learners will start out with the L1 value of the proposed parameter (see White 1985, 1989, Schwartz & Sprouse 1994). More specifically, they will perform as in Hypothesis 1 below:

Hypothesis 1: Bulgarian learners will perform more accurately in recognizing the atelicity of a dynamic verb and an unspecified cardinality object (e.g. *make cakes*) than in recognizing the telicity of a dynamic verb with a specified cardinality object (e.g. *make a cake)*. On the assumption of transfer, the *make a cake* type telic sentence, lacking a preverb in English, would straightforwardly be interpreted as atelic by Bulgarian-speaking learners. Since in Slavic a simplex verbal form with no preverb is atelic, a similar form of the English verb (*make* in the examples above) will indicate atelicity to the learner. In other words, where test sentences elicit atelic responses from native speakers of English, the Bulgarian learners will also produce atelic responses; but where test sentences elicit telic responses from native speakers of English, the Bulgarian learners will, again, respond with atelic. So learner responses will appear to match those of English natives just in case of the English atelic sentences; but the learner responses should be completely different from the native speaker responses in the case of English telic sentences.

On the other hand, Spanish beginning and low intermediate learners are predicted to perform as in Hypothesis 2 below:

Hypothesis 2: Spanish native speakers will judge both the telic and atelic sentences equally accurately. Where test sentences elicit atelic responses from native speakers of English, the Spanish learners will produce atelic responses; where test sentences elicit telic responses from native speakers of English, the Spanish learners will, correctly again, respond with telic. Their L1

Spanish grammar does not allow them to treat telic and atelic sentences as if they are the same and facilitates their acquisition of English telicity marking.

4. The L2 Experiment

4.1 Participants

Twenty-two native speakers (NS) of Bulgarian and 21 NSs of Spanish, all adult learners of English, participated in the experiment.[1] They were tested in Bulgaria and Argentina, respectively. Most of the subjects in both groups were high school and university students. They participated voluntarily and were given the written tests in their classrooms. Their mean age was 18.3 for the Bulgarian group and 17, 1 years for the Spanish group. 32 NSs of English served as controls, 16 speakers of British English (BrE) and 16 speakers of North American English (NAmE). BrE and NAmE controls were necessary because at the start it was hypothesized that there might be some dialectal differences between BrE and NAmE in the domain of aspect. It turned out there were none.

4.2 Tasks and Materials

Independent Measure of Proficiency. Participants in the Bulgarian and Spanish groups were judged as low intermediate learners of English on the basis of an independent measure of proficiency: a cloze test (see Slabakova 1997c for details). Apart from the first sentence, given whole for establishing context, every seventh word was omitted throughout the whole passage, giving 40 blanks altogether. Subjects were asked to provide a word that would fit meaningfully in that space. The exact-word method of scoring was used, i.e. if a blank was filled with the exact match of the word in the original text, one point was given. If no word was supplied or if the word supplied was meaningful, but not the exact match of the original word, no point was given. Thus, the maximum score was 40.

Aspectual Interpretation Task. Participants were asked to assess on a scale from -3 to +3 how well two clauses in complex sentences combine with each other. The seven point scale was used in order to give subjects sufficient space for encoding nuanced judgements between the two extremes "perfectly natural combination" and "a very unnatural combination". There were 28 sentences in all, 12 test sentences in 2 conditions and 16 fillers.

(14) <u>Characteristic and Telic (C+T)</u>
Antonia worked in a bakery and made a cake.
(15) <u>Characteristic and Atelic (C+A)</u>
Sharon worked in a bakery and made cakes.

Since the first clause in test sentences as in (14) established a habitual situation, it was expected that the telic clause that followed, if indeed it was interpreted as telic by the participants, would be considered a worse than perfect match. On the other hand, the same habitual clause (see (15)) in combination with an atelic second clause was expected to be judged as a better match than the one in (14). Thus the prediction is that the Spanish and English NS groups will judge

[1] The original participant pool of Bulgarian native speakers was larger, but I will be reporting here on the learners who fell into the Low Intermediate proficiency group.

sentences as in (14) as sufficiently different than sentences as in (15), while the Bulgarian NSs will fail to demonstrate this contrast.

Stories Task. In this second experimental task participants were asked to read a story, establishing a clear telicity or atelicity context. Two sentences were given below each story, and subjects had to indicate the one that described the story best. All the test sentences were grammatical English sentences, their appropriateness depended on the context provided by the story. The advantage of this type of task is that one can indirectly access aspectuality judgements without the subjects' having to concentrate on the form of the sentence to be judged. The test included 18 stories and pairs of test sentences, 6 establishing atelic context, 6 describing telic events and 6 fillers. (16) and (17) provide examples of atelic and telic stories.

(16) Samantha worked in a bakery. The bakery sold bread as well as cakes and cookies. Samantha worked from early morning until late afternoon.

☐ Samantha made a cake.
☐ Samantha made cakes.

(17) Yesterday Julie got up early. It was her son's birthday. She usually liked to surprise him for his birthday. She decided to surprise him with a birthday cake.

☐ Julie made a cake.
☐ Julie made cakes.

The specific predictions here are that the English and Spanish NS groups will be equally accurate in matching telic and atelic stories to the appropriate sentences below, while Bulgarian learners of English will be less accurate on telic than on atelic stories.

4.3 Results

Independent Measure of Proficiency. One of the conditions for establishing transfer effects is to use learner groups at a comparable level of proficiency. If this condition is not met, one can never infer that differences in performance are due to transfer and not to lower linguistic competence instead.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Participant Groups in Cloze Task

Participant Groups	M	SD	Score Range
NAmE controls (n=16)	25.9	2.64	21-31
BrE controls (n=16)	26.1	1.76	22-28
Bulgarian learners (n=22)	7.02	4.14	6-14
Spanish learners (n=21)	7.98	5.1	6-15

The cloze test results were used in order to ascertain that the two groups of participants were at the same level of proficiency. Cloze scores were compared in a single-factor ANOVA. It was found that they did not differ significantly ($F(1, 43) = 1.47$, $p = 0.43$) and consequently, the participants can be assumed to be at the same level of proficiency in English.

Aspectual Interpretation Task

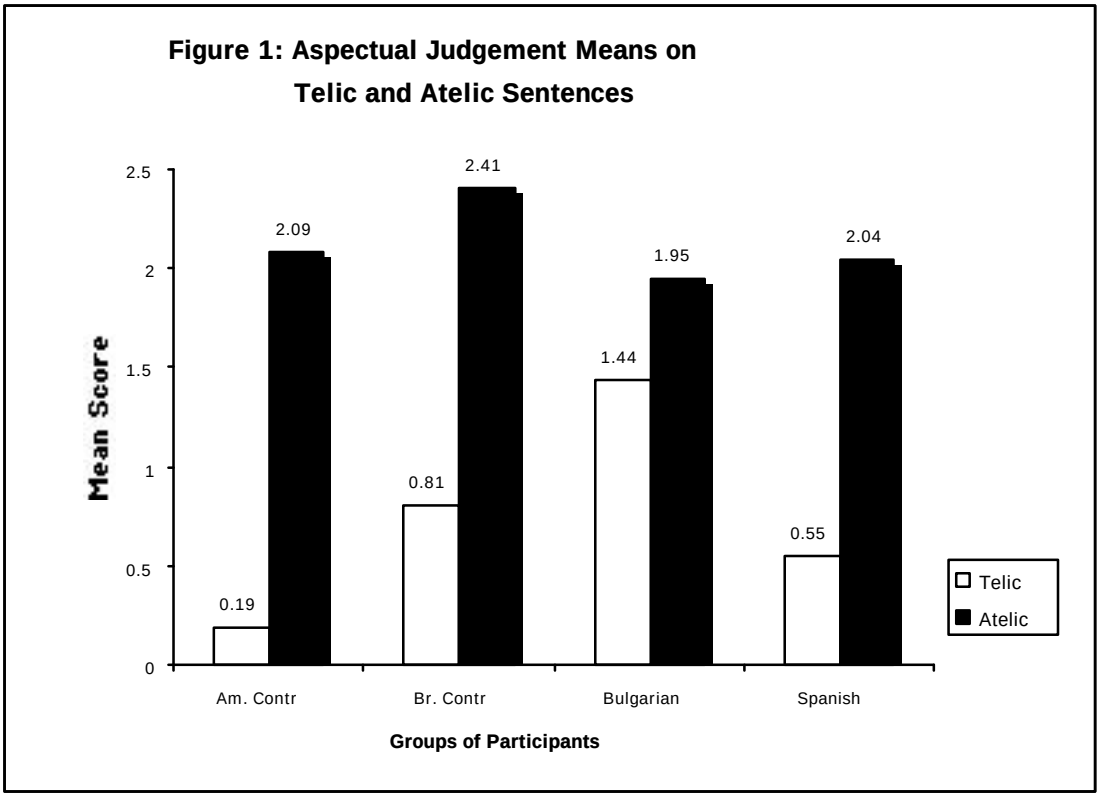


Figure 1 illustrates the participants' judgement of how well the telic and atelic clauses combine with atelic habitual context, and the maximum score is 3. In this task, we are looking for a significant difference between C+T (telic) and C+A (atelic) condition means. Native speakers and Spanish learners recognize the distinction between sentences as in (14) *Antonia worked in a bakery and made a cake* versus (15) *Sharon worked in a bakery and made cakes*, but Bulgarian learners do not. Repeated measures ANOVA was performed (see Table 2).

Table 2: Statistic Effect of Telicity by Participant Group (Repeated-Measure ANOVA)

Participant Groups	F	df	*p*
NAmE controls	38.08	1,30	0.0001
BrE controls	42.95	1,30	0.0001
Bulgarian learners	4.56	1,42	0.085
Spanish learners	17.69	1,40	0.0001

In order to confirm that Bulgarian learners do not recognize the contrast, let us compare mean judgements across condition (Table 3).

Table 3: Statistic Effect of Group for Telic and Atelic Sentences in Aspectual Interpretation Task (Repeated-Measure ANOVA)

Type of Sentence	F	df	*p*
Telic	5.8	3,73	0.0001
Atelic	1.36	3,73	0.27

Two one-factor ANOVAs were performed on telic and atelic sentences separately, looking for an effect of group. On telic sentences, there was a highly significant effect of group. Post-hoc Scheffé analysis showed that this group effect was due to the performance of Bulgarian learners. In particular, the Bulgarian group mean differed from all the other group means. Spanish learners and the two control groups' performance did not differ. Crucially, on atelic sentences all learner groups and controls performed without any difference. Thus, the performance of the Bulgarian learners can be described more adequately now. It is not only the case that they do not exhibit any contrast between telic and atelic sentences. In addition, they perform accurately on atelic sentences and inaccurately on telic sentences.

Stories Task. This task proved to be comparatively "easy" for the participants, as indicated by the high accuracy scores. A learner could perform correctly if he or she knew plural marking and articles in English. Since the stories had to establish context, they included an object either in singular or plural, bare or with an article, in other words, an object of specified or unspecified cardinality. The sentences below the stories differed only in the objects' cardinality, and the learners could easily identify the correct cardinality by matching plural marking and articles. Still, the results of the learners present an interesting comparison (see Table 4). Although the difference in accuracy between Bulgarian and Spanish learners is 6 percentage points in the same direction, Bulgarian learners are significantly more inaccurate on telic than on atelic sentences, while Spanish learners are not.

Table 4: Mean Accuracy (in %) and Statistic Effect of Telicity by Participant Group in Stories Task (Repeated-Measure ANOVA)

Participant Groups	Mean (SD)		F	df	*p*
	Atelic	Telic			
NAmE controls	99 (0)	99 (0)	--	1,30	0.00001
BrE controls	99 (0)	100 (0)	--	1,30	0.00001
Bulgarian learners	84 (11)	78 (23)	7.42	1,42	0.01
Spanish learners	89 (10)	83 (14)	2.14	1,40	0.15

4. Discussion

It is worth pointing out that Spanish low proficiency learners are so accurate in the marking of telicity, in fact, comparably to native speakers, although Spanish marks aspect

somewhat differently from English, if we take the whole clause structure into consideration. As I pointed out earlier, Spanish has another aspectual opposition in the system of tenses, Preterite vs Imperfect, which could have had an impact on the subjects' judgements of telicity in English. The following sentences are translations of the test sentences exemplified in (19) and (20), translated into Spanish. I assume that the intransitive verb *work* of the context clause will be mapped onto the Imperfect tense (*trabajaba*) in Spanish.

(18) Antonia trabajaba en una pastelería e hizo tortas. BOUNDED
Antonia work-3sS/IMP in a bakery and make-3sS/PRET cakes ATELIC
'Antonia worked in a bakery and made cakes.'

(19) Antonia trabajaba en una pastelería y hacía tortas. UNBOUNDED
Antonia work-3sS/IMP in a bakery and make-3sS/IMP cakes ATELIC
'Antonia worked in a bakery and made cakes.'

The sentence in (19) is the more natural variant of the test sentence *Antonia worked in a bakery and made cakes* than the sentence in (18). It is logical to assume that low proficiency learners will map the English simple past tense *made* of the test clause on the preterite tense of their L1 and consequently, the English equivalent of (18) which they saw in the test, will sound a little odd. In other words, it is possible that the sentence in (18) encodes conflicting aspectual information for Spanish NSs, on the one hand atelic, but on the other hand bounded by the grammatical/viewpoint aspect. Even so, these learners exhibited consistently high accuracy in judging atelic sentences.

On the other hand, Bulgarian low proficiency learners did not demonstrate that they have acquired the contrast between telic and atelic sentences in English. They patterned with native speakers on judging atelic sentences but were significantly less accurate in judging telic sentences and in matching telic sentences to telic context stories. This dissociation between telic and atelic sentences in the interlanguage of Bulgarian learners is hard to explain without resorting to transfer of their L1 value of the aspectual parameter. If they had homed in on the target value as the Direct Access hypothesis suggests, they would have exhibited the pattern of responses of the Spanish low proficiency learners, which is not the case. If what we observe is some kind of L1 interference or delay in acquisition, the differential treatment of telic and atelic marking in English still remains incomprehensible. Proponents of the delay of acquisition explanation will have to account for why this delay affects one type of simple transitive sentences and not the other.

5. Conclusion

In the spirit of recent proposals that the exact nature of initial linguistic representations should be further investigated (Gair 1998, Schwartz 1998, White 1996), I have explored the initial values of the aspectual parameter in the interlanguage of Spanish- and Bulgarian-speaking learners of English. It was shown that Spanish low-proficiency learners are very accurate in marking telicity and atelicity in English while Bulgarian learners are equally accurate, but only in atelic sentences. It was argued that this differential accuracy is directly related to the L1 value of the parameter instantiated in the learners' grammar at this point. Thus the results support Full Transfer and argue against Direct Access to UG. The findings of the reported experiment suggest that in the area of aspect we find the same L1 transfer effects as in the previously studied areas of second language acquisition, like null subject, verb-raising and others (see Gass 1996 for a comprehensive discussion).

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