

COMPETENCE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN NATIVE AND NEAR-NATIVE SPEAKERS

An Investigation of the Preterite-Imperfect Contrast in Spanish

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It has been suggested that tense and aspect distributions are very difficult to learn in a second language (L2), they are prone to fossilize universally, and their interpretive properties are subject to a critical period (Coppeters, 1987). This study focuses on the acquisition of the semantic implications of the preterite-imperfect contrast in Spanish by English-speaking individuals of very advanced proficiency in Spanish who were not living in a Spanish-speaking country. By assuming that aspect is encoded in a functional category where the features [\pm perfective] are checked, depending on the language

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(Giorgi & Pianesi, 1997), this study asks whether ultimate attainment in the aspectual domain is possible and whether features of functional categories not selected in early childhood are subject to a critical period, as Hawkins and Chan's (1997) Failed Formal Features Hypothesis states. Experimental evidence from two tasks probing the interpretations of perfective and imperfective aspectual forms in Spanish suggests that many learners (almost 30%) in our total subject pool (including advanced to near-native speakers) and 70% of the near-native group performed like native speakers on all sentence types in all tasks. Although aspect is certainly a difficult area to master, particularly because the meanings of the imperfect are acquired quite late, L2 learners are clearly able to overcome the parametric options of their native language. At least for this domain, it is suggested that access to Universal Grammar does not necessarily decay with age in L2 acquisition.

For a variety of reasons, adult second language (L2) learners do not appear to be as successful as children learning their first language (L1), at least in terms of the end product achieved: L1 acquisition is complete, whereas L2 learners reach their ultimate attainment at different points of the L2 acquisition route, and some even fossilize at intermediate stages. Precisely because there is quite a range of variability in terms of degrees of ultimate attainment, a long-standing debate in the field is the possibility that, as for L1 acquisition, there is a critical or sensitive period for L2 acquisition (ranging from age 6 to perhaps after puberty), after which adult L2 learners are not likely to attain complete nativelylike competence in the L2 phonology or morphosyntax (Birdsong & Molis, 2001; Bley-Vroman, 1990; Coppeters, 1987; DeKeyser 2000; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2000; Johnson & Newport, 1989, 1991; Lenneberg, 1967; Long, 1990; Oyama, 1976, 1978, 1979; Patkowsky, 1980, 1990; Scovel, 1988; Sorace, 1993). Assuming that children acquire their L1 constrained by Universal Grammar (UG), the commonly observed differences between child L1 and adult L2 acquisition in terms of ultimate attainment have often been taken to suggest that the operation of UG in L2 acquisition somehow appears to deteriorate with age (Bley-Vroman; Schachter, 1989).

Despite some uncontested differences between L1 and L2 acquisition (see Bley-Vroman's, 1990, Fundamental Difference Hypothesis), there are also aspects in which both acquisition processes converge. In many areas of linguistic knowledge (and we are not referring here to the morpheme studies of the 1970s), L2 learners also pass through systematic developmental stages that cannot be traced back to properties of their respective L1s or to the target language, such as the use of resumptive pronouns in languages that do not typically allow these pronouns (Tarallo, 1983) or the appearance of overregularization errors with intransitive verbs (Montrul, 2000). Similar developmental errors have been widely documented in L1 acquisition (for resumptive pro-

nouns, see Labelle, 1996, and McDaniel, McKee, & Bernstein, 1998; for causative errors, see Bowerman, 1982). Second, L2 learners have also been shown to acquire very subtle properties of grammar that are not present in their L1, not obvious from the input, or not taught in language classrooms (Bruhn de Garavito, 1997; Dekydtspotter, Sprouse, & Anderson, 1997; Kanno, 1997; Pérez-Leroux & Glass, 1999; White, 2000). That is, there appears to be a logical problem in L2 acquisition as well.

Third, many studies of ultimate attainment have demonstrated that an important number of L2 learners can acquire the same degree of competence and performance as that of a native speaker (NS) in areas like phonology (Bongaerts, 1999; Flege, 1987) and syntax (Birdsong, 1992; Bruhn de Garavito, 1999; Flynn & Manuel, 1991; White & Genesee, 1996), which casts doubt on the validity of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) as a comprehensive explanation for L1-L2 differences in ultimate success (for an updated overview of this debate, see Bialystok, 1997; Bialystok & Miller, 1999; Birdsong, 1999; Birdsong & Molis, 2001; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2000; Long, 1990).

Although it is true that many, if not most, L2 learners never reach an endstate similar to that of NSs, a few appear to do so with regard to some grammatical aspects, and the question is what to make of these successful cases. As reported in Birdsong (1999), in most studies based on a random sample of participants meeting a residency requirement (ranging from 5 to 10 years, depending on the study), the incidence of nativelylike attainment ranged from 5% to 15% of the sample. However, studies such as White and Genesee (1996) have shown that, when strict methodological criteria are applied for the selection of participants, so that in addition to a residency requirement all near-native participants are indistinguishable from NSs on a variety of measures at the outset of the study, an important number of near-native speakers (usually ranging from 20% to 30% or more, depending on the study) have been found to perform like NSs on a variety of tasks. Lee and Schachter (1997) dismissed this procedure of filtering the most "talented" or "gifted" learners as counter-evidence for the CPH mainly because these subjects, they claimed, are not representative of a normal population, particularly when the vast majority of adult learners fail to achieve such levels. However, as Birdsong reported, it is not clear that success rates are that minimal either. White (2003) saw this objection as misconceived because to gain a better understanding of the nature of endstate grammars it makes sense to look at subjects whose performance is nativelylike so as to investigate whether their competence is also nativelylike. Indeed, this was precisely the question that Coppieters (1987) set out to answer in his famous study: Do nonnative speakers (NNSs) who have reached a level of surface equivalence with NSs in language use and proficiency (i.e., performance) also have the same underlying competence as NSs? Rather than targeting a more general population of advanced L2 speakers, Coppieters also focused on NNSs who were deemed to pass as NSs in production, but he made this classification on impressionistic grounds.

In addition to the previously mentioned empirical evidence and leaving

aside obvious matters like child-adult cognitive differences, many generative researchers have maintained that for conceptual and empirical reasons L1 and L2 acquisition appear to have a common epistemological basis (e.g., Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996, among others) and, at least to some extent, that the language faculty (i.e., UG) constrains L2 acquisition as well. Although the issue of whether L2 learners have access to UG is still debated in SLA research, the discussion is no longer conceived as having polarized yes/no answers simply because these extreme positions are not compatible with the available evidence of successful and unsuccessful learners. Most recently, SLA researchers working within the generative framework have begun to explore the possibility that, because language is not a monolithic phenomenon but has a modular structure composed of a lexicon, a set of formal features, a universal computational system, different interacting modules, and interfaces (Chomsky, 1995), variability and apparent incompleteness in L2 acquisition could be explained if there existed multiple critical or sensitive periods (see Lamendella, 1977, and Seliger, 1978, for previous suggestions along these lines). For example, Lee and Schachter (1997) suggested that different principles of UG (e.g., binding, subadjacency) and parameters have different age-related cut-off points for successful triggering and acquisition; in Eubank and Gregg's (1999) version of this claim, critical or sensitive periods affect different areas of linguistic knowledge (i.e., phonology, syntax, lexicon, etc.) and even subcomponents of these modules (e.g., lexical items, inflections, syntactic effects of abstract features). Additionally, to explain persistent fossilization in the morphosyntactic domain, Beck (1998) proposed localized critical periods specifically affecting the feature strength of functional categories. In recent years, efforts have been made to isolate precisely which linguistic modules, submodules, features, or interface areas are affected, how, and why.

A clear example of those efforts is Hawkins and Chan's (1997) Failed Formal Features Hypothesis (FFFH). This hypothesis states that there is a critical period for the selection of parameterized formal features but that principles of UG are still available. Those formal features not selected during the course of L1 acquisition become inaccessible to enter computations in L2 acquisition in adulthood. Assuming dissociation between abstract, formal features and morphophonological spell-outs (Beard, 1995; Halle & Marantz, 1993), this implies that L2 learners may be able to map features from functional categories in their L1 to new L2 morphophonological material, but they will not have access to the functional features of the L2. The result is that L2 learners may use the morphology of the L2 with the feature specifications of their L1. An open question, which we address in this study, is whether this theory makes the right prediction for all features, such as [\pm interpretable] or just [-interpretable] ones, as argued by Sorace (2000). Features that make an essential contribution to meaning (i.e., plural, human, gender, or aspect) are [+interpretable], whereas those that are purely grammatical and only relevant to morphosyntax (i.e., case or agreement) are [-interpretable].

With this background in mind, this article investigates whether NSs and ad-

vanced NNSs differ in their endstate competence by looking at the acquisition of the aspectual, interpretive properties of the preterite and imperfect past tenses in Spanish. Although an important body of research has investigated the emergence and development of tense-aspect morphology at initial stages of L2 development (see Bardovi-Harlig, 1999, for an overview), very little is known about its ultimate attainment. As we will show, this area of grammatical knowledge is quite complex and subtle, and part of this knowledge may not easily be derived from input or instruction. An investigation of this phenomenon directly responds to Long's (1990) call for more demanding tests of ultimate attainment. Developmental data from a variety of L2 learners of Romance languages suggests that the perfective-imperfective grammatical contrast is perhaps one of the most difficult areas of grammar to master. Seliger (1978) even claimed that tense and aspect, together with the distribution of some prepositions and articles, tend to fossilize universally. Coppieters (1987), who tested knowledge of the *imparfait-passé composé* distinction by French near-native speakers, concluded that nativelike competence in the tense-aspect domain is not possible and that this area of the grammar, which he assumed was not part of UG, is therefore subject to a critical period.

Much has happened since Coppieters's (1987) study. Advances in our understanding of different grammatical endstates, the nature of near-native competence (Sorace 1993, 1995⁴, 1999; White & Genesee, 1996), and linguistic theorizing combined with sophisticated research methodologies allow us to revisit and reexamine Coppieters's and others' claims on ultimate attainment within a unifying approach. Starting from the premise that tense-aspect is part of UG, we follow current theories of inflection and aspectual phenomena within a generative perspective (Bonomi, 1997; de Miguel, 1992; de Swart, 1998; Giorgi & Pianesi, 1997), according to which grammatical aspect is instantiated in the functional category AspP, situated between VP and TP in the clause structure, where the formal features [\pm perfective] are checked. Taking into account theoretically motivated distinctions between the aspectual systems of Germanic and Romance languages, this approach offers a solid theoretical foundation to understand the nature of linguistic knowledge. Moreover, it enables us to formulate precise research questions and hypotheses that take into account recent developments in linguistic theory and theories of impairment in L2 acquisition, such as the FFFH.

Our study asks whether the semantic features [\pm perfective] and their interpretive consequences are subject to a critical period, as Hawkins and Chan (1997) and Beck (1998) have suggested for other morphosyntactic features like [wh] and agreement. After applying a stringent criterion for the classification of near-native subjects as that of White and Genesee (1996), results of two experimental instruments testing interpretive properties of preterite and imperfect tenses suggest that very advanced adult L2 learners of Spanish can successfully learn the complex semantic and morphological distribution of these tenses, even in cases when direct evidence from the input or L1 knowledge might not be straightforward. Although acquisition of these aspectual

[Q1]

distinctions is certainly gradual, we demonstrate that there are competence similarities between NSs and NNSs in the ultimate attainment of semantic interpretations. Our results are consistent with the view that after a critical age the [\pm perfective] formal features do not seem to be permanently damaged (Beck) or unavailable (Hawkins & Chan) in nonnative grammars.

THE PRETERITE AND IMPERFECT CONTRAST IN SPANISH: MORPHOSYNTAX AND SEMANTICS

In Spanish the indicative past tense has two forms—preterite and imperfect. The difference between the two forms has to do with aspect. Aspect denotes the difference between a complete or an incomplete event, and it can be encoded in the lexical classes of verbs (lexical aspect) or grammaticalized and marked by inflectional morphology on the verb (perfective or progressive morphemes). Lexical aspect depends on the meaning of the verb and semantic properties of its internal argument and adjuncts (i.e., predicates). An event can have an inherent limit or endpoint, as in *Mary wrote a sentence*, or it can have no endpoint, as in *Mary writes beautiful stories*. Events with an inherent endpoint are telic, and events without an endpoint are atelic. Telicity is partly the basis for the classification of verbs into Vendler's (1967) four different aspectual categories, as shown in (1).

- | | | |
|-----------------|--|-----------------------------|
| (1) States | <i>saber, ser, amar</i> | “know,” “be,” “love” |
| Activities | <i>correr, cantar</i> | “run,” “sing” |
| Accomplishments | <i>correr una milla, hacer una torta</i> | “run a mile,” “make a cake” |
| Achievements | <i>notar, encontrar</i> | “notice,” “find” |

States are nondynamic properties that constitute no change. Activities are homogeneous processes going on in time without inherent goal (*María corrió por horas* “Mary ran for hours”). Accomplishments involve a process going on in time and an inherent culmination point, after which the event can no longer continue (*María corrió una milla* “Mary ran a mile”). Finally, achievements have an inherent culminating point, but the process leading to that point is instantaneous (*El viejo se murió* “The old man died”). Activities, accomplishments, and achievements are dynamic classes (Verkuyl, 1993), as opposed to states, which are nondynamic or stative. Because they have an inherent end, accomplishments and achievements are telic. By contrast, states and activities lack an endpoint and are atelic.

Grammatical aspect—perfective and imperfective—is expressed morphosyntactically on the verb. Whereas telicity is used to describe the aspectual nature of events at the lexical level and refers to potential endpoints, the term *boundedness* (Depraetere, 1995) describes the properties of grammatical aspect and refers to actual boundaries. Thus, perfective aspect is bounded: It looks at the situation from outside, as having a beginning and an end, but disregards its internal structure, as in the Spanish sentence in (2) and the English

equivalent in (3). If Paula painted a picture, then the event of painting started and finished, and the result is a picture.

- (2) *Paula pintó un cuadro.*
 (3) *Paula painted a picture.*

On the other hand, imperfective aspect is unbounded, looks at the situation from inside, and is concerned with internal structure without specifying the beginning or end of the situation, as in the Spanish example in (4) and the English translation in (5). In this case, the event of painting a picture has a potential endpoint and is hence telic. However, the imperfect morphology in Spanish (*-aba*) and the English progressive morphology (*-ing*) on the verb indicate that the action was in progress and does not specify when it started or whether the action has culminated (unbounded).

- (4) *Paula pintaba un cuadro.*
 (5) *Paula was painting a picture.*

Tense-aspect morphology (preterite vs. imperfect or progressive) may interact with the inherent aspectual value of verbal predicates. Although the central tendency is for atelic predicates (states and activities) to occur with the imperfect tense and for telic predicates (accomplishments and achievements) to occur with the preterite, in Spanish all the aspectual predicates can be expressed with preterite and imperfect, depending on what the speaker wants to convey. This is illustrated by the examples in (6)–(9).

- | | |
|---|----------------|
| (6) <i>El vestido me quedó/ quedaba bien.</i>
the dress to-me fit-PRET/ fit-IMPF well
“The dress fit me well.” | state |
| (7) <i>Pedro leyó/ leía en el jardín.</i>
<i>Pedro read-PRET/ read-IMPF in the yard</i>
“Pedro read in the yard.” | activity |
| (8) <i>Carlos escribió/ escribía un poema.</i>
<i>Carlos write-PRET/ write-IMPF a poem</i>
“Carlos wrote a poem.” | accomplishment |
| (9) <i>Juan alcanzó/ #alcanzaba la cima.</i>
<i>Juan reach-PRET/ #reach-IMPF the top</i>
“Juan reached the top.” | achievement |

As noted by King and Suñer (1980) and Giorgi and Pianesi (1997), achievement predicates (*alcanzar la cima* “reach the top”) in Romance are odd for some speakers (hence the symbol # in [9]) when the imperfect expresses an ongoing event in the past. Because achievements have an inherent endpoint, they are incompatible with the unbounded interpretation of the imperfect in (9) unless there is a specific pragmatic context or adverbial that emphasizes

the process leading to the result (e.g., *Juan alcanzaba la cima cuando una ráfaga de viento se lo impidió* “Juan was reaching the top when a strong wind prevented him from reaching it”).¹

Stative verbs tend to occur with the imperfect tense. However, in Spanish, as in other Romance languages, there are some verbs that alternate between stative and eventive depending on the past-tense form (*conocer* “know,” *saber* “know,” *poder* “be able,” *tener* “have,” *querer* “want”). Thus, *saber* “know” in (10) is stative in the imperfect but can become an achievement in the preterite, receiving an inchoative interpretation, as in (11). The preterite denotes the occurrence in the past of the initial phase of the state. (In English, this alternation between *know* and *find out* is achieved lexically.)

- (10) *Juan (ya) sabía la verdad.*
Juan (already) know-IMPF the truth
 “Juan (already) knew the truth.”
- (11) *Juan supo la verdad (en ese momento).*
Juan know-RET the truth (in that moment)
 “Juan found out the truth (in that moment).”

An important difference between Spanish and English is that the perfective-imperfective contrast is not grammaticalized in English. Although Spanish and other Romance languages express the perfective-imperfective opposition independently of the progressive-nonprogressive opposition, English only expresses the latter.² This morphosyntactic difference between the two languages has crucial implications for the interpretive domain. Because English lacks a past tense analogous to the imperfect, dynamic predicates are almost always interpreted as perfective in the simple past. The sentences in (12) show that it is not possible to continue an event that in the previous clause was expressed with the simple past because this tense form entails that the event is bounded.

- (12) a. #*Pat ran along the coast and is still running.* activity
 b. #*Pat ran three miles and is still running three miles.* accomplishment
 c. #*The train arrived and is still arriving.* achievement

With states, however, the simple past is neutral about the perfective-imperfective distinction. Because continuation of the state in the coordinated clause is possible, sentence (13) can either mean that Susan is no longer sick (perfective) or that she is or was still sick (imperfective).

- (13) *Susan was ill (and she is still ill).* state

There are some meanings of the preterite and imperfect that can be expressed in English by the simple past and the progressive, respectively. For example, the simple past and the preterite can express a single event, culminating or terminating in the past (episodic reading), as in (14) and its equivalent in (15),

and the imperfect, like the English progressive, can express an ongoing event in the past with eventive predicates, as in (16) and (17). However, stative predicates, as in (18) and (19), are usually incompatible with the progressive tense in the two languages.

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|------|--|-------------|
| (14) | <i>Miguel robó dinero en el autobús.</i> | preterite |
| (15) | <i>Miguel robbed money in the bus.</i> | simple past |
| (16) | <i>Cuando el jefe llegó la secretaria guardaba las carpetas.</i> | imperfect |
| (17) | <i>When the boss arrived the secretary was putting away the files.</i> | progressive |
| (18) | <i>Patricia sabía la verdad.</i> | imperfect |
| (19) | <i>*Patricia was knowing the truth.</i> | progressive |

In addition to these facts, the Spanish imperfect has a variety of other meanings that cannot be expressed by the English progressive such as that of habitual action in the past, which in English can be expressed with the simple past and the verbs *would* or *used to*; the sentences in (20)–(22) illustrate this point.

- | | | |
|------|--|-------------|
| (20) | <i>Lourdes practicaba tenis cuando era niña.</i> | imperfect |
| (21) | <i>*Lourdes was practicing tennis when she was a child.</i> | progressive |
| (22) | <i>Lourdes practiced/used to–would practice tennis when she was a child.</i> | |

Genericity, which is related to habituality, is yet another meaning of the imperfect in Spanish that cannot be expressed by the progressive in English.³ Sentence (23) with the imperfect has a generic (universal) interpretation, whereas the same sentence with the preterite in (24) has a specific (existential) interpretation.⁴ Note that both sentences are translated into the simple past in English.

- | | |
|------|--|
| (23) | <i>El dinosaurio comía algas.</i>
<i>the dinosaur eat-IMPF kelp</i>
“The dinosaur ate kelp.” |
| (24) | <i>El dinosaurio comió algas.</i>
<i>the dinosaur eat-PRET kelp</i>
“The dinosaur ate kelp.” |

These interpretations also obtain with a variety of impersonal constructions in Spanish—namely, impersonal *se* constructions (de Miguel, 1992; Schmitt, 1996), arbitrary second-person singulars, arbitrary first-person plurals, and infinitives (Casielles, 1994; Hernanz, 1988). The sentences in (25) are both impersonal *se* constructions. When the aspectual reference is imperfective, as in (25a), the subject of *se* can have two possible interpretations: It can be interpreted as universal or generic, or as specific, including the speaker in its referent. However, if the verb is in the preterite (perfective), as in (25b), the

generic interpretation is not possible: The empty category in subject position receives an arbitrary interpretation (somebody), an unspecified agent, and includes the speaker.

- (25) a. *Se comía bien en este restaurante.*
se eat-IMPF well in this restaurant
 “One/we would eat well in that restaurant.”
se = la gente en general “people in general”
 = *nosotros* “we”
- b. *Se comió bien en este restaurante.*
se eat-PRET well in this restaurant
 “We ate well in this restaurant.”
se = #la gente en general “people”
 = *nosotros* “we”

To account for the morphosyntactic and semantic differences between the Spanish and English facts previously described, we follow Giorgi and Pianesi’s (1997) analysis of the parametric differences between Germanic and Romance languages, an analysis couched within Chomsky’s (1995) Minimalist framework. Emphasizing a very close connection between morphosyntax and semantics in the aspectual system, Giorgi and Pianesi asserted that “languages convey different temporal and aspectual information because the morphemes expressing tense and aspect exhibit different properties” (p. 6). Independent evidence for these claims has come from their analysis of the present perfect in the two language families as well as an in-depth comparative analysis of the present tense and imperfect in Romance languages.

A fundamental difference between English and Romance verbal forms is that, in English, verbs can be bare roots, devoid of any inflectional morphology, and can be ambiguous as to lexical category (e.g., *jump*, *smile*, and *dance* can be nouns or verbs). In Romance languages, verbal roots cannot appear as free forms (e.g., *cantar* “sing” but not **cant*, *saltar* “jump” but not **salt*) and are not ambiguous as to syntactic category. On the basis of an analysis of the interpretive facts of the present tense with eventive predicates, Giorgi and Pianesi claimed that English verbs acquire categorial features by being associated with the aspectual feature [+perfective] in the lexicon (otherwise they can be ambiguous as to lexical category). In English, the continuous reading with eventive verbs in the present tense (accomplishments, activities, and achievements) is not normally available, as in (26), whereas the Spanish present in (27) can describe an action in progress because Spanish does not associate the feature [+perfective] with the present tense.⁵

- (26) #*Juan eats an apple right now.*
- (27) *Juan come una manzana en este momento.*

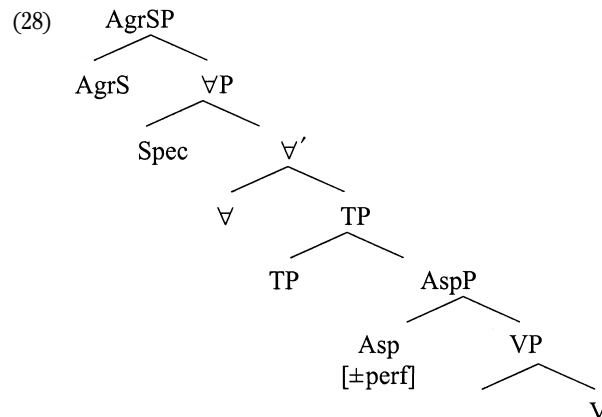
Under the assumption that tense and aspect head their own functional projections (Chomsky, 1995; Pollock, 1989), Giorgi and Pianesi (1997) proposed that the functional category AspP, and its associated feature [\pm perfective] en-

Table 1. Spanish and English feature composition and AspP values

English AspP		Spanish AspP	
F-features	M-paradigm	F-features	M-Paradigm
+perfective	simple past	+perfective	preterite
		-perfective	imperfect

tailing closure, are instantiated in Germanic and Romance languages. The formulation of this functional category was previously proposed by de Miguel (1992) to explain the aspectual restrictions of verbs in a variety of Spanish syntactic constructions. The crucial difference between English and Spanish lies in the feature composition and values of the AspP category, as shown in Table 1 where *F-features* refers to formal features and *M-paradigm* to morphological paradigm. According to Giorgi and Pianesi, English inherently associates the feature value [+perfective], which encodes boundedness, with all eventive predicates (i.e., activities, accomplishments, and achievements). The feature value [-perfective] is simply not relevant in English. However, following de Miguel, we further assume that in Spanish AspP is associated with both [\pm perfective] features. Spanish verbs do not have any inherent aspectual feature: They acquire their aspectual properties by checking the [\pm perfective] features in AspP through preterite and imperfect tense morphology. It appears that the feature values [\pm perfective] are also crucial to account for the generic and specific interpretations of the preterite and imperfect morphology with certain impersonal constructions in Spanish. For Giorgi and Pianesi, the Romance imperfect is neutral as to the perfective-imperfective distinction, whereas preterite always selects perfectivity. Following Grohmann and Etxepare's (1999) analysis of root infinitives in Spanish, we assume that with the Spanish imperfect there is a universal quantifier (\forall P) positioned above the TP, as illustrated in (28).

[T1]



The universal quantification of the imperfect is determined by the presence of a phonetically empty quantifier whose syntactic manifestation is the imperfective morphology. When the subject pronoun of a verb in the imperfect rises to the specifier of the $\forall P$, the generic interpretation obtains. When the subject pronoun is in the scope of deictic tense, the specific interpretation obtains. The subject pronoun in the preterite-tense sentences cannot rise to the specifier of $\forall P$ simply because $\forall P$ does not exist.⁶

ON ULTIMATE ATTAINMENT OF ASPECT

Most investigation of the L2 acquisition of tense-aspect in Spanish has been concerned with the emergence and development of tense-aspect morphology in instructed learners (Hasbún, 1995; Lafford, 1996; Liskin-Gasparro, 2000; Ramsay, 1990; Salaberry, 1997, 1999) and naturalistic learners (Andersen, 1986) at beginner and intermediate levels. With the exception of Montrul and Slabakova (2002), these studies have evaluated Andersen's Primacy of Aspect Hypothesis, which posits that verbal morphology initially encodes lexical aspect rather than tense in developing grammars. Even though learners receive extensive instruction on the use of preterite and imperfect, which are quite frequent in the input, most studies reveal that the mastery of these verbal forms is not fast and that learners go through systematic stages of development. The preterite tense, hypothesized to be the default (Liskin-Gasparro, 1997; Salaberry, 1999), is acquired first and appears with telic events (accomplishments and achievements). The imperfect is a later acquisition and is mapped to atelic predicates (activities and states). Subsequently, the preterite extends to the atelic classes and the imperfect to the telic classes. Achievements in the imperfect and states in the preterite are the latest to be acquired, if at all. Because to our knowledge there are no studies of the acquisition of these tenses in Spanish endstate grammars, we will review studies on French and English.

Coppieters (1987) investigated whether French NNSs who functioned (i.e., performed) like NSs also developed underlying grammars (i.e., competence) identical to French NSs. Participants were 21 near-native speakers from a variety of L1 backgrounds who had acquired French as adults (after age 18). The subjects were professors of French language and literature, linguists working on French, and graduate students and professors of other academic disciplines studying and teaching in a French university. They had spent 5.5–37 years in France, with a mean of 17.4 years. All participants satisfied the criterion of language use and proficiency, as evaluated impressionistically first and later corroborated by their superior performance on the ACTFL oral interview. The 20 NSs in the control group were from France and Belgium.

Coppieters used a 107-sentence questionnaire testing a variety of French structures (some structures were deemed to fall within UG, and others were not). Among these structures the test included five sentences testing the con-

trast between *imparfait* and *passé composé*. Sentences (29) and (30) are two of the five sentences (examples [15] and [16] from Coppieters, 1987, p. 559).

- (29) *Est-ce que tu {as su/savais} conduire dans la neige?*
 “Did you manage/know how to drive in the snow?”
- (30) *{J’ai très souvent mangé/Je mangeais très souvent} de la racine d’arnica après cette histoire.*
 “I often ate arnica root after that event.”

Speakers were asked to indicate whether *imparfait* and *passé composé* were acceptable to them, and if so, whether there was a meaning difference between the two forms. (The five sentences testing the perfective-imperfective distinction were quite heterogeneous: Two included change-of-meaning preterites, one had an achievement verb, and two described a habit in the past.)

Coppieters (1987) found (a) clear quantitative and qualitative differences between the NSs and the near-native speakers, with no subject from the near-native group performing like a NS; and (b) near-native speakers to be more accurate with structures falling within the UG umbrella (complex syntax) than with so-called cognitive or functional aspects of language such as the *imparfait-passé composé* distinction. With these sentences in particular, Coppieters documented the most divergence, concluding that NSs and NNSs did not interpret sentences in the same way. Although lacking appropriate theoretical and methodological tools, Coppieters at that time implicitly differentiated formal properties of grammar that are acquirable from interpretive properties that may be indeterminate, in the sense of Sorace (1999, 2000).

Birdsong (1992) offered an extensive criticism of Coppieters’s (1987) study, mostly grounded on methodological problems with the test instrument and the selection of subjects. He correctly questioned the status of linguistic structures that do not qualify as part of UG and noted that there were different tokens of sentences per structure (ranging from two to seven). He also noted that 41 of the test items required more complex responses than the remaining 66. It is not surprising, then, that more variability was found with the items requiring a three-way response (like the sentences with the *imparfait-passé composé* contrast) than with those requiring only one, and these results should have not been lumped together in a common statistical analysis. Birdsong also pointed out clear educational differences between the near-native group (all were university educated) and the NS group (which included many people with no university education) as well as the fact that the L1 of the near-native subjects was not controlled for.

In replicating Coppieters’s (1987) study, Birdsong (1992) designed a more adequate test instrument and applied different subject-selection criteria. He used a grammaticality judgment task with scalar responses, including as many of Coppieters’s UG-related linguistic variables as possible. The participants were all NSs of English who were living in France at the time of testing, linguistically naïve, and college educated. No screening procedure was used to select

the near-natives: Subjects simply self-assessed their competence in French and had to have resided a minimum of 3 continuous years in France. Birdsong's results showed that, whereas NSs and near-native speakers were different as groups, 15 of the 20 near-natives had deviance scores falling within the range of the deviance figures attested for the NSs. No evidence for a UG or non-UG distinction was found. Absent from Birdsong's replication of Coppieters's study, however, was the *imparfait-passé composé* distinction. Birdsong reported to have excluded structures that posed problems for elicitation or interpretation and that did not fit the general design of the instrument.

Cranshaw (1997) investigated the acquisition of English tense-aspect features by 20 French L1 and 20 Chinese L2 speakers who had begun studying English after age 12. Like Birdsong (1992), Cranshaw used the 3-year residence requirement in an English-speaking country but noted that in many cases this criterion was not a reliable measure of near-nativeness. Using a variety of oral, written, and judgment tasks to elicit aspectual forms and metalinguistic judgments, Cranshaw found significant differences between the NS group and the two groups of near-native speakers in all tasks. Furthermore, there was an L1 effect: The French L1 speakers performed closer to the English NSs than did the Chinese L1 speakers. However, at the individual level, he found that 4 out of 40 (or 10%) near-native speakers (3 French and 1 Chinese) performed within the range of variation of the NSs in all tasks. Thus, unlike Coppieters's (1987) results, Cranshaw's results provided evidence that some near-native speakers who acquire English after the critical period appear to attain native-like competence as far as verb tense and aspect are concerned even when the 3-year residence criterion for establishing near-nativeness was not very reliable.

To summarize, two studies on different target languages investigating near-native competence in the tense-aspect domain have offered contradictory results: The French study concluded that the contrast is not acquirable, whereas the English study suggested the opposite. Because the perfective-imperfective contrast is much more complex in Romance than in Germanic languages due to the existence of the imperfect tense, success stories from English might not be sufficient to override negative results from Romance languages. We also note that, if there is a critical period, this should exist regardless of the target language tested. Given that no study on near-native competence of the perfective-imperfective aspectual distinction in Spanish exists to date, the aim of our study is to reexamine the conclusion that this aspectual contrast is not acquirable in Romance and that native and near-native speakers do not interpret sentences in the same way.

Assuming that the syntactic analysis provided previously in example (28) is correct, the task of the English-speaking learner of Spanish involves recognizing that Spanish verbs are morphologically complex words not inherently associated with the feature [+perfective] in the lexicon. Furthermore, they need to learn the existence of a feature [-perfective] in Spanish, the appropriate morphological distinction between preterite and imperfect tense mor-

phology, and the correct mapping of the formal feature [+perfective] with preterite morphophonology and [-perfective] with imperfect morphophonology. Finally, imperfect morphology, but not preterite, is linked to an empty quantifier or operator. Thus, knowledge of the perfective-imperfective aspectual distinction in Spanish comprises knowledge of the morphosyntax (the preterite-imperfect inflectional paradigms), its associated semantic interpretation [\pm perfective], and its generic versus specific interpretations with impersonal sentences (the generic quantifier).

In addition to this morphosemantic parametric difference between the two languages, we would like to suggest that correct mapping of form and meaning in this aspectual domain does not appear to be a straightforward task for English-speaking learners. The distribution of tense-aspect markers and the subtlety of their interpretations are not always obvious from the input for most learners, teachers, or even linguists:

Extracting the precise contribution of an *imparfait* or a *passé composé* to the meaning of a given utterance in a given context is a very difficult and complex endeavor. Typically, the context will OVER-determine the tense; it will be unclear what the tense expresses by itself. . . . Studies of tense aspect distinction abundantly illustrate that developing predictive principles to account for the use of tenses in any language is a far from straightforward matter. (Coppieters, 1987, p. 567, emphasis in original)

Indeed, many aspects of the preterite-imperfect distribution are taught (e.g., change-of-meaning preterites, and habitual and continuous meanings of the imperfect vs. the one-time event interpretation of the preterite), whereas others are not (e.g., constraints on generic-specific subject interpretations). It appears that constraints on generic-specific interpretations, in particular, and the mapping of these meanings onto morphological forms cannot be arrived at by using English or by simple exposure to input because this constitutes an example of a negative constraint on interpretation (Crain & Thornton, 1998). That is, learners need to realize that the imperfect tense in impersonal sentences can have a perfective (specific) or an imperfective (generic) interpretation. At the same time, they need to realize that the preterite does not allow two interpretations. Because the simple past in English can express a completed episodic event as well as a habitual sequence of events and genericity, learners could incorrectly assume that the preterite in Spanish can do so as well. As it turns out, this hypothesis would be incorrect.

THE STUDY

If we assume that aspect is instantiated in a functional category, the two related questions that arise are: (a) whether the L2 acquisition of features not instantiated in the L1 is subject to a critical period, and (b) if features of functional categories are not permanently impaired (as has been claimed by Beck, 1998), whether nativelike attainment in the interpretive domain of the preter-

ite-imperfect contrast in Spanish is possible, particularly in nonnative individuals deemed to have reached the endstate in performance.

If this grammatical domain is subject to a critical period and if we follow Hawkins and Chan (1997) in assuming that the restriction lies in the inability to access abstract features not instantiated in the L1, then even very advanced English-speaking learners of Spanish should be unable to acquire the [-perfective] feature of Spanish AspP and the universal quantifier of the imperfect tense, which would lead to the following consequences:

1. Inability to distinguish between bounded and unbounded interpretations of preterite and imperfect with stative predicates
2. Difficulty distinguishing the eventive and stative interpretations of stative verbs that shift lexical class depending on the past-tense form (*sabía* vs. *supo*), despite extensive instruction in language classrooms
3. Difficulty with the habitual meaning of the imperfect tense
4. Inability to interpret the imperfect tense in impersonal constructions as having both a generic interpretation and one that includes the speaker
5. Inability to interpret the preterite as not having a generic interpretation

By contrast, if aspectual interpretations are not subject to a critical period, if unused features remain accessible, and if ultimate attainment like that of a Spanish NS is possible, then very advanced English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish deemed to have reached endstate will perform like NSs and will show acquisition of all the syntactic and semantic properties associated with the feature [-perfective] and the universal quantifier associated with imperfect morphology in Spanish.

Methodology

Participants. Twenty NSs of Spanish from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries (2 from Spain, 12 from Argentina, 3 from Colombia, 1 from Costa Rica, and 2 from Mexico) and 64 NNSs of Spanish whose L1 was English participated in the study. Nine of the 12 NSs from Argentina were tested in Argentina. The remaining individuals were tested in the United States and had been residing there for 6 months to 2 years.

Because the study aimed at identifying potential near-native speakers, as in Coppieters's (1987) study, participants were recruited from among language instructors, professors, and advanced undergraduate students in Spanish language programs at three major research universities in the United States; all had started learning Spanish in high school. Unlike the participants in studies by Coppieters, Birdsong (1992), White and Genesee (1996), and many other studies of near-native competence, age of arrival is not a predictor variable in our case because our NNSs were not living in a Spanish-speaking environment but had daily contact with the Spanish language mainly through their work or studies; they had, though, previously lived in a Spanish-speaking country for

Table 2. Participants' information

Participants	Age	Age of first exposure	Years lived abroad
NSs (<i>n</i> = 20)			
<i>M</i>	27.2	—	—
<i>Range</i>	18–33	—	—
<i>SD</i>	3.48	—	—
NNSs (<i>n</i> = 64)			
<i>M</i>	29.13	14.85	6 years, 2 months
<i>Range</i>	19–56	12–24	6 months–10 years
<i>SD</i>	7.74	6.50	—

extended periods of time, ranging from 6 months to 10 years.⁷ Despite arguments to the contrary (Birdsong, in press⁴; Lee & Schachter, 1997), we agree with White and Genesee that studies of ultimate attainment should include participants who are deemed to have achieved endstate on other independent proficiency measures before investigating whether they perform well on some UG-related linguistic properties.

Table 2 summarizes the information about age, age of exposure to Spanish, and amount of living abroad experience for the participants.

Procedure to Identify Potential Near-Native Speakers. To independently assess the NNSs' proficiency in Spanish, we used a proficiency test adapted from the *Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera* (DELE).⁸ The test consisted of a cloze passage and a multiple-choice vocabulary test, and the maximum possible score was 50. The test was administered to all participants. As the NSs performed at a minimum of 90% accuracy (45/50), with a mean of 48.35 and a standard deviation of 1.46, we then applied this minimum score as the cut-off point to identify the most advanced NNSs in the sample. Of the 64 NNSs, 40 performed above 90% like the NSs, and the remaining 24 participants who scored below 90% accuracy were classified as advanced speakers.

Additionally, all NNSs were interviewed by a Spanish NS for 10 minutes and were asked five questions ranging from personal to hypothetical topics that required using a variety of tense forms. The interviews were tape-recorded and independently judged for "nativeness" by two linguistically naïve NS judges, following similar procedures used by White and Genesee (1996) and Bongaerts (1999). The tapes contained samples from NSs and NNSs in a randomized order. The judges were only informed that they would hear a variety of speech samples and that their job was to identify which subjects sounded like NSs. They were also made aware that subjects came from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries. Unlike White and Genesee, who asked the judges to rate the subjects on four different categories (phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon) in addition to an overall estimation of nativeness, we only asked the judges to assign a score ranging from 1 (definitely nonnative) to 5 (definitely native) on the basis of their overall impression of nativeness.

Table 3. Experimental groups according to proficiency test and oral interview scores

Proficiency measures	NSs (<i>n</i> = 20)	Near-natives (<i>n</i> = 17)	Superior (<i>n</i> = 23)	Advanced (<i>n</i> = 24)
Proficiency test				
<i>M</i>	48.35	47.41	46.69	40.12
<i>Range</i>	45–50	45–49	45–49	33–44
<i>SD</i>	1.46	1.41	1.22	3.01
Oral interview				
<i>M</i>	4.76	4.56	1.43	1.47
<i>Range</i>	3.5–5	3.5–5	1–3	1–3
<i>SD</i>	0.49	0.55	1.09	0.84

Note. The maximum score on the proficiency test was 50, and the maximum score on the oral interview was 5.

Judges were informed that this overall assessment of nativeness assumed assessment of different components of language. All NSs were identified as NSs with a range of 3.5–5.⁹ All NNSs whose scores fell within that range (17 of the 64) were also classified as natives. These same 17 speakers performed above the 90% criterion in the proficiency test. Thus, on the basis of the combined results of the proficiency test and the oral interview, the NNSs were classified into three experimental groups: 24 advanced speakers with proficiency scores below 90% and scores of 1–3 in the oral interview, 23 superior speakers with proficiency scores above 90% but scores of 1–3 in the oral interview, and 17 near-native speakers with proficiency scores above 90% and oral interview scores of 3.5–5 like the NSs. This information is summarized in Table 3.

[T3]

A one-way ANOVA performed on the proficiency scores revealed significant differences between the groups, $F(3, 80) = 80.563$, $p < .0001$. Differences between particular groups were investigated through Tukey's HSD procedures, and the alpha level was set at .05. The NSs and the near-natives were no different from each other, but the NS group was different from the superior and the advanced groups. An ANOVA on the interview scores was also significant, $F(3, 80) = 102.503$, $p < .0001$. The scores of the near-natives and the control group were significantly different from those of the superior and advanced groups.

Test Instruments. Two tasks were designed to test the acquisition of the morphological and semantic properties of aspectual tenses in Spanish. We have already used these tasks successfully with intermediate and advanced learners (Montrul & Slabakova, 2002; Slabakova & Montrul, 2002).^{10,11} One instrument was a sentence-conjunction judgment task that specifically tested the semantic implications of the preterite and imperfect tenses. For this task, subjects were presented with a list of sentences consisting of two coordinated clauses conjoined by *y* "and" or *pero* "but." Some of the combinations made sense, whereas others were contradictory. Using a scale ranging from –2 (illogical) to +2 (logical), subjects indicated whether the two clauses made sense

together. They were instructed to choose 0 when they did not know or had no intuition about a particular sentence. In most cases, we had minimal pairs in which the imperfect tense in the first clause made the sentence logical, whereas the preterite made it illogical. For example, the correct response to (31) is 2, and for (32) it is -2. For the complete battery of sentences, see Appendix A.

- | | | |
|------|---|---------------|
| (31) | <i>La clase era a las 10 pero empezó a las 10:30.</i>
“The class was-IMPF at 10 but started at 10:30.” | logical |
| (32) | <i>La clase fue a las 10 pero empezó a las 10:30.</i>
“The class was-PRET at 10 but started at 10:30.” | contradictory |

The test consisted of a total of 56 sentences (28 logical and 28 illogical). There were 14 sentences with accomplishment verbs, 14 with achievement, and 14 with stative verbs. There were no activity predicates included in this task.¹² In each class, seven verbs appeared in the preterite and seven in the imperfect tense. To establish that L2 learners could distinguish logical from illogical sentences in Spanish, the instrument also included 14 distractor sentences (7 logical and 7 illogical) using other tenses.

The other main task was a truth-value judgment task (Crain & Thornton, 1998; Grimshaw & Rosen, 1990), which we used to test other meaning contrasts related to the preterite-imperfect aspectual distinction—namely, stative predicates that shift to eventive with the preterite form, habitual versus one-time events in the past, and generic versus specific interpretation of empty pronouns in impersonal constructions. This task has been used successfully in other L2 acquisition studies (Bruhn de Garavito, 1997; White, 1995), and we have used this same instrument with intermediate and advanced learners (Slabakova & Montrul, 2000). The subjects had to choose whether the sentence following each story was true or false. Participants read 80 stories, 40 followed by a sentence in the preterite and 40 followed by a sentence in the imperfect, 12 of which were distractors with sentences requiring a false answer. Three main conditions were tested. Condition A tested change-of-meaning preterites (*saber* “know,” *poder* “be able,” *querer* “want,” etc.) with stories supporting an eventive or a stative interpretation (12 stories appearing twice each). Condition B tested habitual versus one-time events, with stories supporting a one-time event or a habitual action in the past (10 stories appearing twice each). Condition C tested generic versus specific subject interpretation with impersonal *se* constructions (12 stories appearing twice each). Appendix B contains examples of stories for the three conditions.

Results

The Sentence-Conjunction Judgment Task. This task tested knowledge of the bounded–unbounded interpretations of perfective and imperfective morphology with accomplishment, achievement, and stative verbs. Recall that

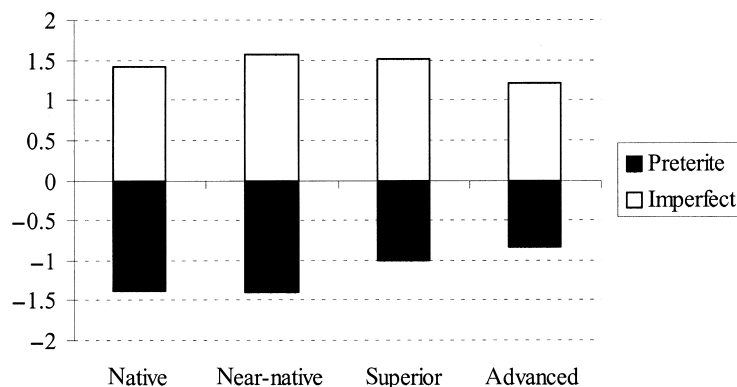


Figure 1. Sentence-conjunction judgment task: Mean responses on accomplishments.

achievements in the imperfect may sound odd for some speakers and that, although the unbounded reading of accomplishments and achievements can easily be translated into the English progressive, stative predicates cannot appear in the progressive.¹³ Thus, to get the contrast between the two readings with stative verbs, learners need to have acquired the [-perfective] value of the imperfect verb form in Spanish.

A specific research question we wish to address is whether NNSs can acquire the same competence as NSs. Therefore, in addition to showing that the NNSs also have a contrast between the preterite and imperfect semantic entailments established in their grammars, we need to compare the performance of the NNSs with that of NSs in absolute terms.

Mean scalar responses of the sentence-conjunction judgment task were submitted to a factorial ANOVA with repeated measures, with group as the between-group factors (native, near-native, superior, and advanced), and tense (preterite and imperfect) and verb (accomplishment, achievement, and state) as the within-group factors. Overall results revealed significant main effects for group, $F(3, 80) = 21.848, p < .0001$, tense, $F(1, 83) = 772.446, p < .0001$, and verb, $F(2, 82) = 62.65, p < .0001$, and all interactions were significant at $p < .05$. To identify specific differences among groups, we carried out Tukey's HSD procedures. All groups performed above 90% accuracy with the distractor sentences, and the contrast between logical and contradictory distractor sentences was significant for all groups, $F(1, 80) = 5,256.177, p < .0001$; there were no significant differences among groups.

[F1] Figure 1 shows the mean responses for accomplishment predicates (*Jorge corría/#corrió la carrera pero al final no participó* "Jorge was running/ran the race but in the end he did not participate"). For all groups, there was a statistically significant contrast between sentences in the preterite (mean responses: natives -1.38, near-natives -1.39, superior -1, advanced -0.83) and in the im-

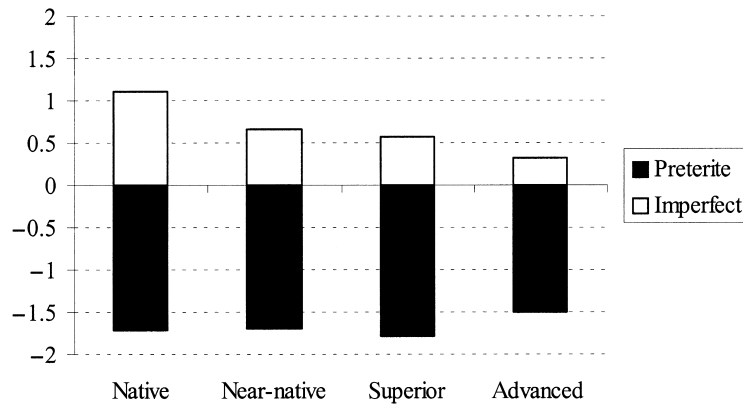


Figure 2. Sentence-conjunction judgment task: Mean responses on achievements.

perfect (mean responses were 1.42, 1.56, 1.51, and 1.21, respectively), $F(3, 80) = 690.926$, $p < .0001$, which indicates that all groups know the bounded–unbounded semantic contrast between the two tenses with accomplishment predicates. There were no statistical differences between the groups with preterite or imperfect sentence types, $F(3, 80) = 1.324$, $p = .272$. Thus, all NNSs performed like NSs.

The results of achievement predicates are illustrated in Figure 2. As can be seen, the responses for the sentences in the imperfect (mean responses: natives 1.10, near-natives 0.65, superior 0.56, and advanced 0.31) received lower numerical ratings than those of the preterite (mean responses were -1.38, -1.42, -1.25, -0.57, respectively). This trend was expected because achievements in the imperfect can sound odd for some speakers if an appropriate context is not provided (*Los González #vendieron/vendían la casa pero nadie la compró* “The González’s #sold/were selling the house but nobody bought it”). However, there was still a significant contrast between the two tenses for all groups, $F(3, 80) = 524.054$, $p < .0001$. Although there were no significant differences among groups for the sentences in the preterite, $F(3, 80) = 1.702$, $p = .173$, a post hoc procedure showed that, with the sentences in the imperfect, the mean response of the advanced group (0.31) differed significantly from that of the NSs (1.10). In short, superior and near-native speakers were no different from the NSs.

Finally, Figure 3 shows the mean scores for stative predicates (*La clase era/#fue a las 10 pero empezó a las 10:30* “The class was at 10 but started at 10:30”). As with all other sentences, there was a significant main effect for tense, $F(3, 80) = 349.103$, $p < .00001$, for group, $F(3, 80) = 4.73$, $p < .05$, and a group by tense interaction, $F(3, 80) = 14.017$, $p < .00001$. A one-way ANOVA ran with states in the imperfect as well as a Tukey’s HSD procedure indicated differ-

[F2]

[F3]

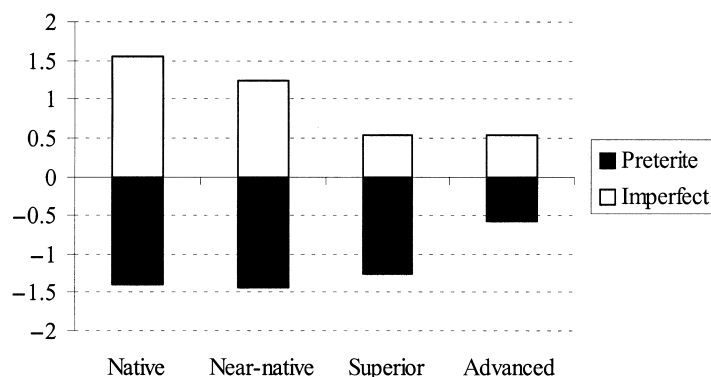


Figure 3. Sentence-conjunction judgment task: Mean responses on states.

ences between the NSs ($M = 1.54$), the advanced group ($M = 0.52$), and the superior group ($M = 0.53$), but crucially, there were no differences between the NSs ($M = 1.54$) and the near-natives ($M = 1.23$). The means of stative verbs in the preterite were also significant among groups, $F(3, 80) = 7.798$, $p < .0001$, mainly due to the performance of the advanced group ($M = -0.57$), which was significantly less accurate than the native ($M = -1.38$), near-native ($M = -1.42$), and superior ($M = -1.25$) speakers.

To summarize, group results indicate that the near-native speakers performed like NSs with all predicates in the sentence-conjunction task, given that there were no statistically significant differences among these groups. The only difference between the superior group and the NSs was detected with stative verbs in the imperfect. When statistical differences were found, these were due to the lower performance of the advanced speakers, especially with state and achievement predicates in the imperfect.

[T4]

To investigate what percentage of individual subjects within each group falls within the range of variation of NSs, we need to look at individual subjects' performance in the main tasks. For these analyses, we adopted the procedure used by Flege, Munro, and MacKay (1995) and Bongaerts (1999) to identify potential near-native subjects. All mean scores of individual NSs were standardized (i.e., converted to z -scores). As shown in Table 4, most z -scores fall within less than 2 standard deviations from the mean, with a few exceptions marked with ^a on the table. Thus, to identify potential NNSs falling within the range of variation of NSs (below 2 standard deviations from the NSs' means), we created a new variable z by applying the following formula: $z = (x - m)/s$, in which x is the original data value, and m and s are the sample mean and standard deviation in the NS group. The z -scores for each NNS group are illustrated in Tables 5 (near-natives), 6 (superior), and 7 (advanced). The newly created z -values greater than 2 were considered nonnative-like. For these tables, the symbol ^a next to each subject number indicates

[T5]
[T6]
[T7]

Table 4. Sentence-conjunction judgment task: Standard scores for the NSs by sentence type

Subject	Accomplishments		Achievements		States	
	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.
1	0.95	0.12	1.75	0.97	2.0	0.97
2	0.02	0.12	0.03	0.97	0.33	1.15
3	1.87	1.75	0.03	0.97	1.33	1.15
4	1.41	1.35	0.75	0.97	0.75	1.15
5	0.02	1.75	1.18	0.45	0.75	1.15
6	0.02	1.51	0.6	1.87	0.75	0.88
7	0.02	0.94	0.03	0.5	0.92	1.15
8	0.44	1.1	0.03	2.34 ^a	0.92	1.5
9	0.44	0.29	1.03	0.02	0.33	0.62
10	2.29 ^a	0.53	2.46 ^a	0.45	0.33	0.44
11	0.9	0.12	0.32	0.02	0.08	0.44
12	1.36	0.12	0.32	0.97	0.92	1.5
13	0.9	0.29	2.46 ^a	0.97	1.33	0.62
14	0.95	0.12	0.46	0.5	1.59	0.88
15	1.41	1.92	0.18	0.92	1.33	1.23
16	0.44	1.1	0.6	0.02	0.08	0.7
17	0.49	0.12	0.6	0.97	0.5	0.17
18	0.02	0.69	0.6	0.92	1.17	1.5
19	0.44	0.53	0.6	0.92	0.92	0.17
20	0.02	0.69	0.6	0.02	0.33	0.09

^a $z > 2$.

that the particular subject scored within the NS range ($z < 2$) for all sentences. A value marked b indicates that the learner performed within the NS range for that particular variable.

Table 5 shows that 12 out of 17 near-native speakers (70.5%) performed like NSs. Tables 6 and 7 show that 6 out of 23 superior speakers (26.1%) and 3 out of 24 advanced speakers (12.5%) met the criterion as well. The advanced and superior speakers displayed most variation with stative predicates in the imperfect, as predicted. Therefore, by using this strict criterion we were able to identify learners that can acquire the semantic implications of preterite and imperfect in all proficiency levels tested even though the great majority of the highly successful learners (12/21 or 57.14%) are found in the near-native group (the other 28.57% are in the superior group and the remaining 14.28% in the advanced group).

The Truth-Value Judgment Task. With this task we tested knowledge of other preterite-imperfect contrasts: (a) the difference between verbs that alternate between a stative or eventive interpretation depending on the past-tense form (*sabía* “he knew” vs. *supo* “he found out”), (b) habitual versus one-time events in the past (*Marcelo robaba/robó en el autobús* “Marcelo would rob/robbed in the bus”), and (c) the generic-specific interpretation of arbi-

Table 5. Sentence-conjunction judgment task: Standard scores for the near-native speakers by sentence type

Subject	Accomplishments		Achievements		States	
	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.
1 ^a	1.41	1.35	0.03	0.5	1.33	0.62
2 ^a	0.95	0.69	1.75	0.02	2.0	0.35
3	3.21	0.12	2.32 ^b	0.92	0.75	0.7
4 ^a	1.87	1.75	0.11	0.97	1.33	0.09
5 ^a	0.49	1.92	0.18	0.02	0.08	0.44
6 ^a	1.87	0.12	1.03	0.97	0.08	1.15
7 ^a	1.41	1.35	1.03	0.97	0.75	0.35
8	0.02	2.33	1.03	3.29	0.5	0.88
9 ^a	0.95	1.35	1.03	0.97	1.42	1.15
10 ^a	1.87	0.29	1.03	1.39	0.33	0.44
11 ^a	0.02	0.12	0.75	0.97	0.75	0.88
12 ^a	0.02	0.12	1.18	0.97	1.17	0.09
13	1.87	1.1	1.03	0.92	2.42	0.09
14	2.29 ^b	0.69	2.89	0.92	3.25	2.0
15	1.83	1.51	3.32	0.92	0.75	0.7
16 ^a	1.87	1.75	0.03	0.5	2.0	0.09
17 ^a	0.49	0.94	2.46 ^b	0.5	2.0	0.09

^aNear-native speakers with $z < 2$ (nativelike) in all sentences.

^b $z > 2$ but falls within range of NSs for that sentence.

trary subjects (*Te pedían/pidieron identificación* “They would ask/asked you for identification”). The first two distinctions are taught in language classrooms, but the semantic restrictions on the generic-specific interpretation are not. Although generics are some kind of habituals, and learners could potentially acquire generics because they know about habituals, what we were particularly interested in testing here is a situation in which the imperfect has an ambiguous interpretation (generic and specific) and the preterite has only one interpretation (specific but not generic). The impossibility of the generic interpretation with the preterite is a negative constraint not easily observable from the input. Furthermore, generics in English can easily be expressed in the simple past, and learners could not use their L1 knowledge to arrive at the correct mapping of imperfect to generics.

Participants received points for choosing correctly true and false sentences. The maximum accuracy scores for conditions A, B, and C were 6, 5, and 6, respectively. Scores on the truth-value judgment task were submitted to a factorial ANOVA with repeated measures, with group as the between-group factor (native, near-native, superior, and advanced) and sentence type (A, B, and C), tense (preterite, imperfect), and response (true, false) as within-group factors. Results showed a main effect for group, $F(3, 80) = 58.67$, $p < .0001$, for sentence type, $F(3, 81) = 22.243$, $p < .0001$, and tense, $F(1, 84) = 18.047$, $p < .0001$, but crucially, there was no main effect for response, $F(1, 83) =$

Table 6. Sentence-conjunction judgment task: Standard scores for the superior speakers by sentence type

Subject	Accomplishments		Achievements		States	
	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.
1 ^a	0.02	1.35	0.89	0.97	0.75	0.44
2	0.02	1.35	1.75	0.5	2.42	0.17
3 ^a	0.95	0.69	0.75	0.92	1.17	0.35
4	1.41	2.33	1.03	0.92	5.76	0.62
5	0.9	0.94	1.32	0.97	2.42	0.09
6	0.49	2.33	1.18	4.23	0.33	0.97
7	1.36	4.36	2.75	0.97	5.34	0.17
8 ^a	0.95	1.1	0.03	0.45	0.5	0.62
9	0.49	4.36	1.6	0.97	3.67	0.17
10	1.87	4.77	1.18	0.97	2.0	0.35
11	0.02	1.35	0.75	0.97	3.67	0.88
12	0.95	3.14	1.18	0.45	4.09	0.97
13	0.95	3.96	0.89	0.02	2.42	0.09
14	0.02	0.12	1.18	0.97	4.09	2.02
15 ^a	0.02	1.75	1.03	0.97	0.08	1.15
16	0.9	0.12	2.46 ^b	0.97	9.09	0.97
17 ^a	1.87	1.35	0.6	0.97	1.59	1.15
18 ^a	0.49	0.12	0.75	0.97	0.92	0.09
19	1.83	1.1	2.18 ^b	0.5	3.67	1.15
20	0.02	4.77	2.18 ^b	0.92	5.76	0.17
21	2.29	0.94	2.6	0.97	7.01	3.08
22	1.87	3.14	1.03	0.97	0.75	3.87
23	1.6	0.96	1.87	3.14	1.03	0.97

^aSuperior speakers with $z < 2$ (nativelike) in all sentences.^b $z > 2$ but falls within range of NSs for that sentence.

1.96, $p = .176$. Distractor stories were included not only to counterbalance the total number of true and false responses but also to make sure that the participants had understood the task and were paying attention to the instructions. All groups were very accurate with these sentences, and there were no significant differences among them, $F(3, 80) = 2.004$, $p = .120$.

Figure 4 shows the results of the sentences of condition A (change-of-meaning preterites). The stative verbs such as *saber* “know,” *conocer* “know/meet,” *poder* “be able,” and *tener* “have” alternate between the stative and eventive reading with the change of past-tense form. Sentences with the verb in the imperfect (*Juan sabía la verdad* “Juan knew the truth”) were true for a story providing a stative context and false for eventive contexts; forms with the preterite (*Juan supo la verdad* “Juan found out the truth”) were false in stative contexts but true in eventive contexts. A repeated measures ANOVA on accuracy scores showed a significant main effect for tense, $F(1, 83) = 8.364$, $p < .005$. Overall performance on the imperfect sentences ($M = 5.12$) was more accurate than on the preterite ($M = 4.85$), and this is expected because the de-

[F4]

Table 7. Sentence-conjunction judgment task: Standard scores for the advanced learners by sentence type

Subject	Accomplishments		Achievements		States	
	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.
1	0.02	2.73	0.89	0.02	2.0	0.7
2	2.29 ^b	0.12	2.46 ^b	0.92	6.59	1.76
3	0.44	0.29	1.18	0.45	3.67	1.76
4	4.14	1.1	1.6	5.65	6.59	2.82
5	1.36	3.96	0.75	0.02	2.42	2.55
6	0.02	0.53	1.75	1.87	4.5	0.09
7	0.44	1.92	1.89	0.45	1.17	2.55
8	1.41	1.35	1.6	0.45	5.76	1.23
9	4.14	4.36	2.6	1.39	4.92	1.5
10	1.83	6.81	0.6	8.02	1.17	4.14
11 ^a	1.87	1.92	0.32	0.45	0.92	0.17
12	0.44	0.12	1.03	0.02	2.42	1.5
13	0.95	3.96	0.89	0.02	2.42	0.09
14	0.02	0.12	1.18	0.97	4.09	2.02
15 ^a	1.83	1.75	1.03	0.97	0.08	1.15
16	0.02	0.12	1.46	0.97	2.42	3.87
17	2.75	1.51	2.98	0.02	2.42	2.02
18	1.83	3.14	1.03	0.97	3.67	0.88
19	0.95	8.04	2.89	2.81	2.0	1.23
20	0.44	1.75	2.18 ^b	0.97	2.0	0.44
21	0.02	8.04	2.75	0.92	5.76	4.67
22	0.49	1.75	1.18	0.97	3.67	3.08
23 ^a	1.87	1.75	1.18	0.5	0.33	0.09
24	1.36	0.94	2.46 ^b	0.5	2.0	0.09

^aAdvanced speakers with $z < 2$ (nativelike) in all sentences.

^b $z > 2$ but falls within range of NSs for that sentence.

fault interpretation with these verbs is the stative one. Moreover, there was a significant main effect for group, $F(3, 80) = 4026.876$, $p < .0001$. We first discuss the stories supporting a stative interpretation. In these cases, sentences in the imperfect were true, whereas those in the preterite were false. The accuracy scores on imperfect sentences were quite high, and an ANOVA revealed no differences among groups (mean responses: natives 5.5, near-natives 5.64, superior 5.30, and advanced 4.90). As for the sentences in the preterite, there were no differences among the native ($M = 5.35$), near-native ($M = 5.05$), and superior ($M = 4.75$) speakers. The advanced group ($M = 4.08$) scored significantly lower than the other groups. For the stories supporting an eventive interpretation, the preterite was true and the imperfect was false. With the preterite sentences, there was a significant difference between the groups, $F(3, 80) = 5.335$, $p < .0002$, due again to the lower performance of the advanced group ($M = 4.29$) whose mean accuracy was statistically different from that of the native ($M = 5.1$), near-native ($M = 5$), and superior ($M = 5.21$) speakers.

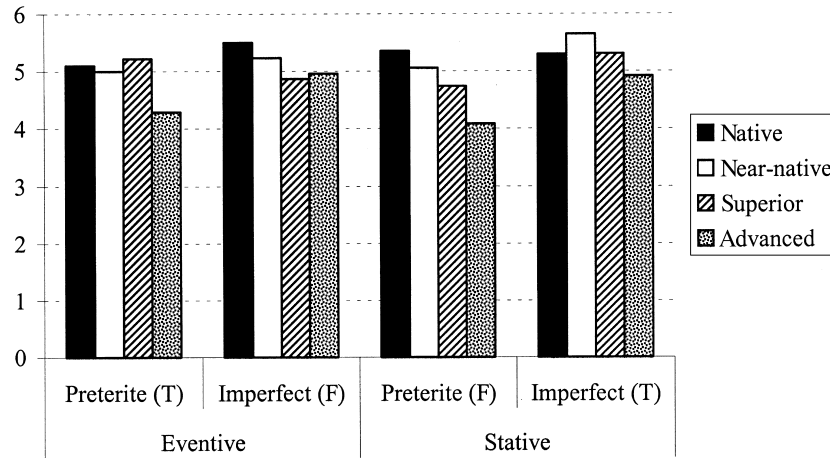


Figure 4. Truth-value judgment task: Mean accuracy on sentences and stories from Condition A.

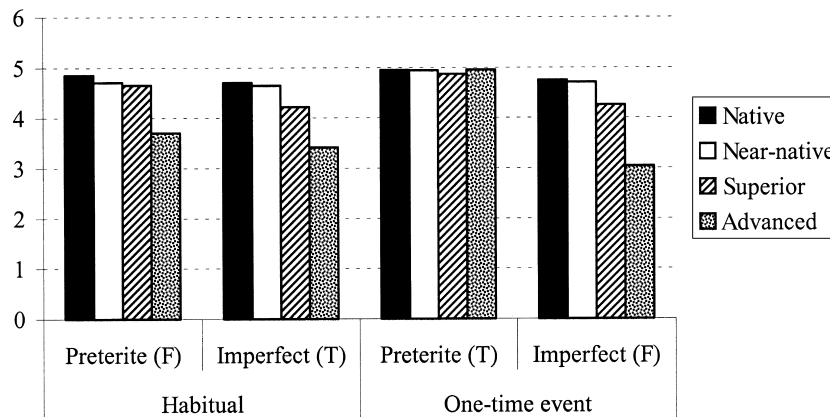


Figure 5. Truth-value judgment task: Mean accuracy on sentences and stories from Condition B.

With the imperfect sentences, the advanced group ($M = 4.25$) was also less accurate than the NSs ($M = 5.5$) and near-native speakers ($M = 5.23$), $F(3, 80) = 8.126$, $p < .0001$, but no different from the superior speakers ($M = 4.86$). Thus, in this condition near-native and superior speakers performed like NSs.

Figure 5 shows the accuracy scores on stories supporting a habitual event versus a one-time event in the past. With habitual stories, the imperfect was true, and the preterite was false; with one-time event stories, the preterite was

[F5]

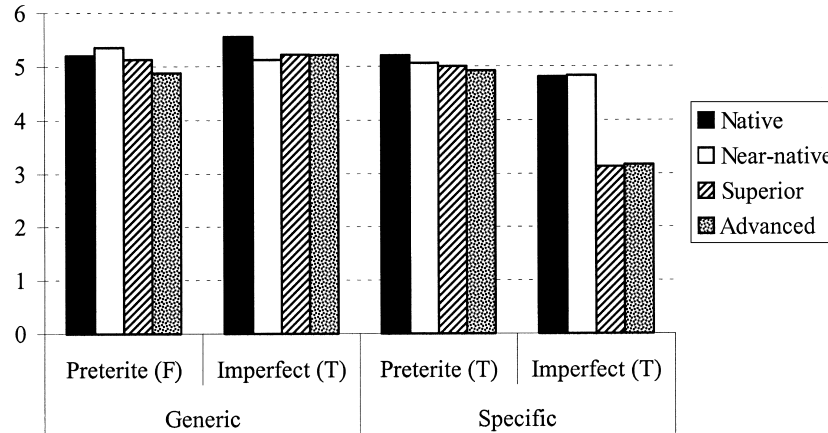


Figure 6. Truth-value judgment task: Mean accuracy on sentences and stories from Condition C.

true, whereas the imperfect was false. A repeated measures ANOVA showed a significant main effect for tense, $F(3, 80) = 32.776$, $p < .0001$, which indicates that performance on the preterite ($M = 4.70$) was better than on the imperfect ($M = 4.21$). There was also a main effect for group, $F(3, 80) = 3,312.112$, $p < .0001$, due to the lower performance of the advanced group, and a tense \times group interaction, $F(3, 80) = 7.21$, $p < .0001$. With habitual stories, there were no statistically significant differences between native ($M = 4.85$), near-native ($M = 4.70$), and superior ($M = 4.65$) speakers with sentences in the preterite. The advanced group ($M = 3.70$) scored significantly lower than the other groups. With imperfect sentences, there were no statistically significant differences between the native ($M = 4.70$), near-natives ($M = 4.64$), and superior ($M = 4.21$) groups, but the advanced group ($M = 3.41$) performed significantly lower than all other groups. As for one-time event stories, with the sentences in the preterite there were no differences among the four groups, $F(3, 80) = 0.553$, $p = .647$ (mean responses: natives 4.95, near-natives 4.94, superior 4.95, and advanced 4.95). With one-time event stories and imperfect sentences, there were significant differences between groups: The advanced group ($M = 3.04$) scored significantly lower than the first three groups (4.75, 4.70, and 4.46, respectively).

[F6] Finally, Figure 6 shows the accuracy scores on impersonal constructions with *se* with stories supporting a generic versus a specific interpretation. Recall that impersonal constructions with the imperfect are ambiguous between a generic or a specific interpretation, whereas with the preterite tense only the specific interpretation is available. Therefore, the sentences in the imperfect were true both in generic and specific stories, whereas the sentences in the preterite were true with specific stories but false with generic stories. A

repeated measures ANOVA showed a main effect for tense, $F(3, 80) = 13.623$, $p < .0001$, with performance on the preterite ($M = 5.09$) higher than that on the imperfect ($M = 4.62$), as well as a main effect for group, $F(3, 80) = 5.657.025$, $p < .0001$. Results of the generic stories were not significant for preterite (mean responses: natives 5.2, near-natives 5.35, superior 5.13, and advanced 4.87), $F(3, 80) = 0.720$, $p = .543$, or for imperfect sentences (mean responses: natives 5.55, near-natives 5.11, superior 5.21, and advanced 5.20), $F(3, 80) = 0.737$, $p = .533$. Thus, all groups correctly interpreted the sentences in the imperfect as having a generic reading, whereas the sentences in the preterite did not support such an interpretation. As with specific stories, all groups were also very accurate in interpreting the preterite sentences as having a specific interpretation (mean responses: natives 5.2, near-natives 5.05, superior 5, and advanced 4.91), $F(3, 80) = 0.340$, $p = .796$. However, the nonobvious learning task is realizing that there is a negative constraint on interpretations: The imperfect tense can also have a specific and generic interpretation, but the preterite is not ambiguous. Mean accuracy on imperfect sentences with specific stories was significantly different among groups, $F(3, 80) = 10.92$, $p < .0001$. There were no differences between the NSs ($M = 4.8$) and the near-native speakers ($M = 4.82$), and no differences between the superior ($M = 3.13$) and advanced speakers ($M = 3.16$), but the NSs and the near-natives were different from the superior and the advanced groups. In short, of the three NNS groups, only the near-natives performed like the NSs, displaying knowledge of both the specific-generic ambiguity of the imperfect and the generic restriction on the preterite. All other speakers seemed to know the negative constraint on the preterite but not the ambiguity of the imperfect.

Our next step in the analysis was to identify learners who scored within the NS range of variation on all sentences. As such, their scores for each sentence type were converted to z-scores. Standardized scores of the NSs are illustrated in Table 8, and those of the NNSs appear in Tables 9–11. We identified 15 out of 17 near-native (88.22%), 5 out of 23 superior (21.7%), and 2 out of 24 (8.3%) advanced speakers passing the $z < 2$ criterion. With the exception of three near-native learners (subjects 8, 13, and 14), all other learners consistently performed like NSs in the truth-value judgment task and the sentence-conjunction task. Of these 22 successful speakers, 68% were from the near-native group, 23% were from the superior group, and 9% from the advanced group.

Near-natives showed the most variable behavior with imperfect in generic contexts (Table 9). The superior speakers diverged from NSs in recognizing the impossibility of the imperfect in contexts where the preterite is required—namely, in change-of-meaning predicates, in one-time event stories, and with a specific subject interpretation (Table 10). The advanced learners showed divergence with most sentences (Table 11), with the exception of sentences representing the default interpretations: change-of-meaning preterites in the imperfect supporting a stative story, the preterite describing one-time event contexts, and the preterite as having a specific interpretation. These

[T8]
[T9-11]

Table 8. Truth-value judgment task: Standard scores for NSs on all sentence types

Subject	Change-of-meaning preterites				One-time event/habitual action				Subject interpretation			
	Eventive		Stative		Habitual		One-time event		Generic		Specific	
	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.
1	1.4	0.73	0.52	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	1.03	0.15	0.1	1.57
2	0.16	0.73	0.97	1.07	1.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	1.15	0.1	0.57
3	1.4	0.73	0.52	0.46	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	2.03	1.15	0.9	0.57
4	0.16	0.73	0.52	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	1.15	0.9	1.57
5	0.16	0.73	0.97	0.46	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	2.03	0.15	0.1	0.43
6	1.4	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	0.1	0.43
7	0.16	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	1.3	0.03	0.15	0.1	0.57
8	0.16	2.18 ^a	0.52	0.46	1.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	1.03	1.15	0.9	1.57
9	0.16	0.73	0.52	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	0.9	0.57
10	0.16	0.73	0.97	0.46	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	1.03	0.15	0.9	0.43
11	0.16	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	1.03	2.15 ^a	1.9	1.57
12	0.16	0.73	0.52	1.98	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	1.15	0.1	1.57
13	1.72	0.73	0.52	0.46	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	1.03	0.15	0.9	0.43
14	1.4	0.73	0.97	0.46	0.22	0.17	0.17	1.3	0.03	1.15	1.9	0.57
15	1.4	0.73	0.52	0.46	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	2.03	0.15	0.9	1.57
16	1.72	2.18 ^a	2.0	0.46	1.22	0.17	0.17	1.3	0.03	0.15	0.9	0.57
17	0.16	0.73	0.97	0.46	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	1.03	1.15	1.9	1.57
18	0.16	0.73	2.0	1.98	0.22	1.17	0.17	2.3 ^a	2.03	0.15	0.1	1.57
19	1.72	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	0.9	0.57
20	0.16	0.73	0.52	0.46	0.22	1.17	1.17	0.3	2.03	0.15	0.9	0.57

^a $z > 2$.

learners had greatest difficulty with the preterite in change-of-meaning preterites and with the imperfect in habitual and generic contexts. Therefore, these results document once again that the imperfect tense is acquired much later than the preterite but that it is eventually acquired.

DISCUSSION

Seliger (1978) made the observation that tense and aspect are prime candidates for fossilization in SLA. Coppieters (1987) argued that near-native speakers of French do not acquire the same intuitions about the aspectual interpretation of the *imparfait* and *passé composé* tenses as French NSs. Although Coppieters believed that the perfective-imperfective aspectual opposition was not part of UG, we followed an analysis that assumes aspect to be encoded in the functional category AspP where the features [\pm perfective] are checked, depending on the language (see also de Miguel, 1992). We also investigated the validity of a current theory of persistent fossilization in SLA based on generative linguistics—namely, Hawkins and Chan's (1997) FFFH, which

Table 9. Truth-value judgment task: Standard scores for near-native speakers on all sentence types

Subject	Change-of-meaning preterites				One-time event/habitual action				Subject interpretation			
	Eventive		Stative		Habitual		One-time event		Generic		Specific	
	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.
1 ^a	1.4	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	1.17	0.3	0.03	1.15	0.9	0.57
2 ^a	1.72	0.73	2.0	0.46	1.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	1.03	2.15 ^b	0.9	1.57
3	1.72	0.73	0.52	0.46	0.22	2.17	0.17	0.3	1.03	2.15 ^b	1.9	2.57
4 ^a	1.4	0.73	0.97	0.46	1.22	1.17	0.17	2.3 ^b	2.03	1.15	0.9	1.57
5 ^a	0.16	0.73	0.52	0.46	1.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	0.9	1.57
6 ^a	1.72	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	1.03	0.15	0.9	0.43
7 ^a	1.4	0.73	0.52	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	2.15 ^b	0.9	1.57
8 ^a	1.72	0.73	2.0	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	0.9	0.57
9 ^a	1.4	0.73	0.52	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	2.9	0.57
10 ^a	1.4	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	0.9	0.43
11 ^a	0.16	0.73	0.52	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	0.9	0.43
12 ^a	1.72	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	2.03	0.15	0.1	0.43
13 ^a	0.16	0.73	2.0	0.46	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	2.03	0.15	0.1	0.57
14 ^a	1.4	0.73	0.52	1.07	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	2.15 ^b	0.9	0.43
15	0.16	0.73	2.0	1.07	1.22	1.17	0.17	1.3	2.03	2.15 ^b	0.1	2.57
16 ^a	0.16	3.63	0.97	0.46	1.22	0.17	0.17	2.3	0.03	2.15 ^b	0.9	0.57
17 ^a	1.72	0.73	2.0	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	1.15	0.1	0.57

^aNear-native speakers with $z < 2$ (nativelike) in all sentences.

^b $z > 2$ but falls within range of NSs for that sentence.

states that, after a critical period, formal features of functional categories that have not been selected earlier in life are no longer accessible in adulthood.

We tested these claims with very advanced English-speaking learners of Spanish. Unlike most other studies of near-native competence, the NNSs in our study were not living in a Spanish-speaking environment, but they had daily contact with the language through their work.¹⁴ They had spent between 6 months and 15 years in a Spanish-speaking country. We applied a very strict selection criterion to identify potential near-native speakers. All NSs and NNSs took a proficiency test and had to pass an oral interview. Only those NNSs who performed within the range of variation of the NSs on the two measures were classified as near-natives. The remaining subjects were classified as superior or advanced learners. All NSs and NNSs completed one task requiring recognition of morphological endings and two tasks specifically devised to test interpretive properties of preterite and imperfect tenses in Spanish. Results of all tasks unequivocally showed that the group performance of the near-native speakers was like that of the NSs. When statistically significant differences were found, these were between the NSs and the advanced group and between the NSs and the superior group.

Table 10. Truth-value judgment task: Standard scores for superior speakers on all sentence types

Subject	Change-of-meaning preterites				One-time event/habitual action				Subject interpretation			
	Eventive		Stative		Habitual		One-time event		Generic		Specific	
	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.
1 ^a	1.4	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	1.9	0.43
2	0.16	0.73	3.5	1.07	0.22	1.17	0.17	2.3 ^b	0.03	0.15	0.1	2.57
3	1.4	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	2.17	0.17	1.3	0.03	1.15	0.9	1.57
4	1.4	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	3.15	0.1	0.57
5 ^a	0.16	0.73	0.52	0.46	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	0.9	0.57
6	0.16	0.73	0.52	1.07	0.22	0.17	1.17	1.3	0.03	0.15	0.1	2.57
7	1.72	3.63	3.5	1.07	0.22	1.17	0.17	2.3 ^b	0.03	0.15	0.1	0.57
8	0.16	2.18 ^b	0.52	0.46	0.22	1.17	0.17	2.3 ^b	1.03	0.15	1.9	3.57
9	3.28	2.18 ^b	3.5	1.98	0.22	2.17	0.17	1.3	2.03	0.15	0.9	2.57
10	1.4	0.73	0.52	0.46	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	3.03	1.15	0.1	2.57
11 ^a	1.4	2.18	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	1.15	0.9	1.57
12 ^a	1.4	0.73	2.01	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	1.9	1.57
13	1.4	3.63	4.99	0.46	4.22	1.17	0.17	4.3	1.03	0.15	0.1	3.57
14 ^a	0.16	0.73	2.0	0.46	1.22	0.17	0.17	1.3	2.03	0.15	1.9	1.57
15	3.28	0.73	2.0	1.98	0.22	1.17	1.17	0.3	2.03	2.15 ^b	0.9	4.57
16	0.16	2.18 ^b	3.5	0.46	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	2.03	1.15	1.9	2.57
17	0.16	0.73	0.52	5.02	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	2.03	4.15	0.1	4.57
18	0.16	3.63	0.52	0.46	3.22	2.17	0.17	3.3	2.03	0.15	0.9	4.57
19	1.4	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	3.15	2.9	2.57
20	1.4	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	2.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	1.15	0.9	1.57
21	0.16	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	1.17	1.17	0.3	1.03	0.15	0.9	5.57
22	0.16	0.73	0.97	0.46	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	2.03	1.15	0.9	2.57
23	1.4	2.18 ^b	0.52	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	0.9	2.57

^aSuperior speakers with $z < 2$ (nativelike) in all sentences.

^b $z > 2$ but falls within range of NSs for that sentence.

Individual results allowed us to identify 12 near-native, 5 superior, and 2 advanced subjects who performed like NSs with all sentences in the two main tasks. That is, we found 19 out of 64, or close to 30%, of the total subject pool (screened and unscreened) that fell within the NS range of variation. Of these 19 successful individuals, 12 (63.15%) were from the screened group of near-native speakers. None of the predictions based on the FFFH were confirmed for the majority of the subjects in the near-native group or for the successful subjects identified in the two other groups, but they were confirmed to a certain extent with all the other learners. However, it could be argued that those unsuccessful learners who have not yet overcome the parametric values of English have not yet reached their final state of SLA in Spanish. (Whether this claim applies to all the NNSs because they were not living in the target language environment is an open question.) Thus, divergence is due to persistent influence of parametric values of the L1, as already observed by Sorace (1993).

Table 11. Truth-value judgment task: Standard scores for advanced speakers on all sentence types

Subject	Change-of-meaning preterites				One-time event/habitual action				Subject interpretation			
	Eventive		Stative		Habitual		One-time event		Generic		Specific	
	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.	Pret.	Imperf.
1	0.16	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	4.3	0.03	0.15	0.9	1.57
2	1.72	3.63	6.48	1.98	1.22	2.17	0.17	3.3	1.03	0.15	0.1	5.57
3	0.16	2.18	4.99	0.46	0.22	0.17	0.17	1.3	0.03	0.15	1.9	0.43
4	0.16	0.73	0.97	1.07	1.22	2.17	0.17	0.3	1.03	1.15	0.9	2.57
5	1.72	2.18	0.97	0.46	0.22	2.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	3.15	1.9	2.57
6	0.16	0.73	0.97	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	1.03	2.15 ^b	0.9	2.57
7	1.72	3.63	3.5	3.5	0.22	4.17	0.17	5.3	1.03	1.15	0.9	4.57
8 ^a	1.4	0.73	0.52	1.98	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	0.1	0.43
9	3.28	0.73	2.0	0.46	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	1.15	0.1	4.57
10	1.72	0.73	6.48	0.46	1.22	2.17	0.17	3.3	2.03	0.15	0.1	2.57
11	1.72	3.63	6.48	1.98	0.22	5.17	0.17	3.3	1.03	3.15	0.9	4.57
12	0.16	0.73	0.52	1.07	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	3.15	0.9	2.57
13	0.16	2.18	0.97	1.07	3.22	0.17	0.17	3.3	1.03	0.15	0.1	0.57
14	0.16	2.18	0.97	1.07	3.22	2.17	0.17	3.3	4.03	1.15	0.1	1.57
15	3.28	2.18	4.99	1.07	5.22	4.17	0.17	5.3	2.03	0.15	3.9	1.57
16	1.72	3.63	2.0	0.46	1.22	1.17	0.17	1.3	3.03	1.15	0.9	3.57
17	4.84	0.73	3.5	1.98	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	1.15	0.1	1.57
18	3.28	0.73	3.5	1.98	4.22	2.17	0.17	4.3	5.03	0.15	0.1	1.57
19	3.28	3.63	6.48	5.02	5.22	4.17	1.17	5.3	3.03	0.15	1.9	1.57
20	1.72	2.18	2.0	1.98	2.22	2.17	0.17	2.3	1.03	0.15	0.1	2.57
21	0.16	0.73	0.97	1.07	1.22	0.17	0.17	1.3	0.03	0.15	4.9	0.57
22	1.72	3.63	0.52	0.46	4.22	3.17	0.17	4.3	1.03	0.15	1.9	2.57
23	1.4	2.81	0.97	0.46	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	2.15 ^b	0.9	5.57
24 ^a	0.16	2.18	0.97	1.07	0.22	1.17	0.17	0.3	0.03	0.15	0.9	1.57

^aAdvanced speakers with $z < 2$ (nativelike) in all sentences.

^b $z > 2$ but falls within range of NSs for that sentence.

The main conclusion to be drawn from these results is that near-native competence in the domain of semantic interpretations is possible, even in situations where proficient L2 learners are not totally immersed in the language. We do not deny the common observation that many language learners have systematic difficulties with the perfective-imperfective opposition in Romance languages, as many of our subjects demonstrated, and that full acquisition of this contrast takes some time. However, to claim that this area of grammar fossilizes universally and is subject to a critical period is perhaps too strong in light of our findings. Our results are compatible with those of Birdsong (1992), Birdsong and Molis (2001), Bongaerts (1999), Cranshaw (1997), and White and Genesee (1996), among others, who were also able to document quite a few successful individuals. On the other hand, we do not intend to

deny that there might be critical periods in SLA altogether or that UG somehow decays with age in other areas. Quite simply, we have not been able to document a critical period for the particular linguistic domain investigated in this study, such as [+interpretable] functional features. Our results are still compatible with the idea of multiple critical periods espoused by Seliger (1978) and more recently by Eubank and Gregg (1999).

Together with many recent studies reporting success stories in SLA (Birdsong, 1992; Bongaerts, 1999; Bruhn de Garavito, 1999; White & Genesee, 1996), we attribute the discrepancy between our results and those of Coppieters (1987) to the methodology employed—both subject selection and test instruments. Coppieters's subjects came from a variety of language backgrounds, and nativelike performance was assessed impressionistically at the outset of the study. Our subjects, by contrast, were all NSs of English, had to pass a proficiency test at above 90% accuracy, and had to perform like NSs in an oral interview independently assessed by two linguistically naïve NS judges. Although other studies have employed the interview method (Bongaerts; Bruhn de Garavito; White & Genesee), ours employed an interview in addition to a proficiency test.

With respect to the test instrument, Coppieters's (1987) study only included five decontextualized sentences in which participants had to make a binary choice between the two tenses and then explain out loud the different meanings of one tense over the other. Instead of asking subjects to give metalinguistic information about possible interpretations of the two tenses, we designed two tasks that included many more sentences counterbalanced across conditions and response type, allowing for a variety of statistical manipulations. Additionally, results of the different tests were analyzed independently because they required different types of responses. In short, because our methodology focused on different manifestations of one linguistic property and was carefully controlled, it is perhaps more systematic than the methodology employed by Coppieters.¹⁵

Let us now consider whether the high incidence of nativelike attainment obtained in this study could be an artifact of the tests used. In other words, could it be the case that the instruments were not challenging enough for the subjects, thereby resulting in high performance even in instances where exposure to Spanish was not very prolonged? An anonymous *SSLA* reviewer questioned whether Coppieters's (1987) test items were more difficult than the items in our tests. However, given that the tests used in the two studies were so different in design, complexity, and length, it is impossible to draw direct comparisons between the two studies. Furthermore, the fact that we find some individuals with less advanced proficiency performing like NSs is not *prima facie* indication that the tests were not challenging because not all of the near-native speakers or superior speakers fell within the NS range either. Rather, this result is indicative of the range of individual variation typical of L2 learning outcomes.

Both anecdotal accounts from the participants and empirical evidence indi-

cate that the tests used were not easy. Many of our NSs and NNSs commented on the difficulty of the tasks during the debriefing session, explaining that they often felt unsure about their answers. Indeed, the accuracy results of the NS group confirm such impressions to some extent. In most studies, NS groups typically perform around or above 90% accuracy on tests of clear grammatical or ungrammatical syntactic structures due to occasional errors resulting from distraction, performance, or even uncertainty. An accuracy score of 100% across the board indicates that all subjects were in agreement with all test items and might be taken as evidence that the test was very easy. However, in the two main tasks used in this study, NSs did not perform at ceiling. This is perhaps because our tests targeted subtleties of semantic interpretations rather than obvious ungrammaticality. In the sentence-conjunction judgment task, the NSs' mean percentage accuracy with the main six sentence types ranged from 94% for achievements in the preterite sentences to 76.4% for achievements in the imperfect,¹⁶ and the other variables (sentence types or conditions tested) reached 80% and 91%, respectively. The results of the truth-value judgment task show a strikingly similar picture: Whereas the accuracy percentages in conditions A and B are in and above the 90% range, most of the sentences in condition C—the most subtle and counterintuitive—received accuracy scores of 80%. These accuracy percentages demonstrate that our test instruments were reliable but not necessarily easy. Indeed, we have used these instruments with learners of much lower proficiency, and they have performed at chance (Montrul & Slabakova, 2002; Slabakova & Montrul, 2000, 2002).¹⁷

We now turn to a discussion of why the 19 subjects (12 near-native, 5 superior, and 2 advanced) from a total pool of 64 NNSs (almost 30%) were so successful. In light of results reported in Sorace (1993) with near-native speakers of Italian whose L1s were French and English as well as two other recent studies—Bialystok and Miller (1999) and Birdsong and Molis (2001)—establishing that different L1-L2 pairings yield different results in studies of maturational effects, could it be the case that our participants were assisted by their knowledge of English? According to Birdsong and Molis, Spanish and English are similar in many fundamental respects, including the fact that “the grammars [of Spanish and English] use both inflectional and adverbial means of marking tense-aspect distinctions” (p. 246). Despite these surface similarities, at a more abstract level the grammatical devices (i.e., tense morphology) employed by the two languages differ, and the interpretive properties of the English and Spanish past tenses differ as well (Giorgi & Pianesi, 1997). English lacks the equivalent of the imperfective tense in Romance languages but can express the meanings of the imperfect in other ways: The continuous meaning is captured by the progressive tenses, the habitual meaning can be captured by the simple past tense (e.g., *John smoked cigars*) in addition to modals and other lexical expressions, and the generic meaning is expressed with the simple past (e.g., *Dinosaurs ate kelp*). To interpret the unbounded meaning of the imperfect tense in Spanish with accomplishment and achievement verbs, learners

could perhaps rely on their knowledge of the progressive because in this case these two tense forms overlap (*María hacía una torta cuando el teléfono la interrumpió* “Mary was baking a cake when the phone interrupted her”). This same strategy cannot be used to interpret stative verbs or habitual sentences, however, because in these cases reliance on the progressive is either ungrammatical (*El auto costaba \$20,000* “*The car was costing \$20,000”) or yields an incorrect interpretation (*El dinosaurio comía algas* [generic] “#The dinosaur was eating kelp”).

With respect to the generic-specific interpretation of null subjects with the preterite and imperfect in impersonal constructions, all NNSs were very accurate with the specific interpretation of the subject with the preterite as well as the generic interpretation of the subject with the imperfect. However, all NNSs also knew that the generic interpretation was ruled out with the preterite, but only the near-natives knew that the imperfect allows a specific interpretation. Crucially, the fact that the simple past can be used in generics in English did not mislead the NNSs to accept this interpretation for the preterite in Spanish. Perhaps this knowledge comes from having correctly mapped the preterite to perfectivity (linguistic knowledge) and from knowledge of perfectivity as a cognitive universal. By contrast, only the near-natives seemed to have acquired the distinction that imperfect has two values in Spanish (generic and specific).

Thus, at some point learners need to overcome the parametric value of their L1 and acquire the fact that the feature [–perfective] is not selected by English but is fully operational in Spanish. The less proficient learners in our study show difficulty with precisely those sentences that were assumed to depend on the availability of the [–perfective] feature for their interpretation, so L1 influence could explain the results of the nonconvergent cases. By contrast, the results of many of the superior learners and of the near-native speakers suggest that these individuals have gone beyond the knowledge structure provided by their L1 and have made the appropriate parametric choice. These results, therefore, go against the predictions of the FFFH and suggest that it is possible to learn a parametric difference after puberty.

What would be the case in other L1-L2 combinations in which the differences between the two languages in the surface realization of aspectual oppositions are more striking than in Spanish and English, as already illustrated by Sorace (1999, 2000)? The Russian perfective-imperfective distinction is notoriously harder to master and constitutes a clear case in point. Unlike English, Russian marks telicity overtly with prefixes on verbal forms, and there are over 19 perfective prefixes to master. Although not particularly intended as a study of ultimate attainment, Slabakova (2002) tested whether NSs of English learning Russian found the semantics or the morphology of Russian aspect difficult to master. She used a test of semantic interpretations and a cloze test to investigate knowledge of morphological forms. Results indicated that the most advanced learners were highly accurate in interpreting Russian telicity marking, with several individuals performing in the 90% accuracy range. At

the same time, results of the cloze test showed that there is a significant gap in their lexical knowledge of prefixes (around 60% accuracy) versus verbs in general (around 80% accuracy). Slabakova concluded that the difficulty in acquiring Russian aspect lies in learning the lexical items signaling telicity but crucially not in learning the grammatical mechanism for telicity marking. In other words, it is not knowledge of the semantic features of functional categories that presents a difficulty for L2 learners but rather mastering all the different perfective allomorphs.

Because our study did not include another group of near-native speakers from a different L1 background (ideally a non-Indo-European language), we lack sufficient evidence to conclude that knowledge of aspectual oppositions in Spanish was directly transferred from English. However, we do not want to dismiss L1 influence in endstate grammars as a nontrivial variable in the degree of success of L2 acquisition. Indeed, in light of recent empirical evidence we believe that there could be L1 influence even at very advanced levels of proficiency, including endstate (Sorace, 1993; White, 2001). After all, Coppiters (1987) found that the degree of divergence from NSs with the interpretation of aspectual contrasts in French was 19% for Romance speakers, 38.2% for Germanic speakers, 50% for Farsi speakers, and 66.7% for speakers of Asian languages (p. 563, figure 4). Furthermore, Cranshaw (1997) found that the French near-natives performed closer to the native English controls than the Chinese near-natives. The issue of L1 influence and near-native competence should certainly remain a topic of further investigation.

Two recent studies, DeKeyser (2000) and Birdsong and Molis (2001), have replicated Johnson and Newport's (1989) study with NSs of Hungarian and Spanish, respectively, and found support for a maturational account of SLA. However, these studies also found a few successful individuals who scored within the NS range. DeKeyser appealed to verbal ability as a strong predictor of success in SLA, whereas Birdsong and Molis made a case for degree of language use. How might these two variables—verbal ability and degree of language use—relate to our results? Because the near-native speakers in our study were university instructors deeply familiar with the structure of Spanish (at least from the perspective of pedagogical grammar) and its literary production, the success of their performance possibly stems from having explicitly learned and taught the distribution of these tenses. It is even likely that these individuals have chosen to pursue studies or a career in foreign languages because they have very high verbal ability. We must note, however, that Coppiters's (1987) participants also included French language professors and linguists working on French, although they did not fare as well as our participants. Unfortunately, we do not have an independent measure of verbal ability to empirically tease apart this possibility.¹⁸

Birdsong and Molis (2001) noted that amount of English used was correlated with the accuracy scores of the late arrivals. Due to their professional profile, our subjects used and were exposed to Spanish a great deal in their everyday lives, but because we did not collect information about the percent-

age of daily Spanish use, we cannot pursue the effect of this variable here. However, studies of language maintenance and loss as well as bilingualism in childhood and adults suggest that language use and frequency influence maintenance (Kohnert, Bates, & Hernández, 1999). Further research investigating this variable with adult L2 speakers at endstate and with bilinguals of different ages is warranted to understand the etiology of critical periods in SLA.

CONCLUSION

By focusing on complex grammatical properties of the Spanish aspectual system in an extended range of contexts, the results of this study showed converging empirical evidence on the performance of the near-native subjects and established that near-native competence in the domain of aspectual interpretations is attainable, even in individuals who are not totally immersed in the language and even in those that might not have arrived at endstate. Even though this area of grammar is certainly difficult to acquire, our results suggest that it is not universally subject to a critical period. In current generative linguistic terms, this means that universal features of functional categories not selected by a given language in early childhood remain accessible in adulthood when learning an L2. Assuming that the mapping of morphology to aspectual meanings falls within the realm of UG, our results are compatible with the view that UG does not decay with age, at least in this specific domain. More specifically, the FFFH was not supported with [+interpretable] features. However, for us to prove that it is only UG and no other problem-solving strategy (as proposed Bley-Vroman's, 1990, Fundamental Difference Hypothesis) that is responsible for our results, we need to conduct further studies in which such variables can be reliably teased apart.

In conclusion, we want to acknowledge that our results are limited in a number of ways. First, we tested a single L1 group, and we concentrated on one specific grammatical domain. Second, our near-native subjects were mostly language teachers and advanced students of Spanish. These factors, admittedly, limit the generalizability of the results beyond the sample of speakers tested in this experiment. What remains an open question for future investigation, therefore, is whether NNSs from other L1 backgrounds, who are not language teachers and have mainly learned Spanish naturalistically, can also perform in these aspect-interpretation tasks like NSs. As it turns out, the issue of maturational constraints in SLA and the etiology of critical periods is far from settled.

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NOTES

1. For specific details as to why the imperfect is incompatible with achievements, whereas the progressive is not, see Giorgi and Pianesi (1997) and references therein. For achievements to have a continuous reading, the progressive must be used, as in (i), and this is true of English as well. In this

case the action is viewed as overt and developing; the progressive adds a sort of “slow camera effect” (King & Suñer, 1980).

- (i) *Juan estaba alcanzando la cima.*
“Juan was reaching the top.”

2. Spanish also has an imperfect progressive tense, as in *Paula estaba pintando un cuadro* “Paula be-IMPF painting a picture” as well as a preterite progressive tense, as in *Paula estuvo pintando un cuadro* “Paula be-PRET painting a picture.”

3. The imperfect also appears in counterfactuals. As Iatridou (2000) has noted, in Romance and many languages counterfactuals and genericity are expressed with imperfect morphology, whereas in English they are expressed by the simple past-tense form. The relationship between genericity and aspect has already been noted by Jackendoff (1972) and also discussed by Chierchia (1995), Cinque (1988), Comrie (1976), and Dahl (1995).

4. An anonymous *SSLA* reviewer observed that with a copula, the preterite could also have a generic interpretation, as in (i).

- (i) *El dinosaurio fue herbívoro.*
“The dinosaur was herbivorous.”

5. An anonymous *SSLA* reviewer correctly pointed out that English roots can also have habitual or progressive interpretations. We submit that those interpretations are crucially dependent on adverbials or the pragmatic context. As we understand it, Giorgi and Pianesi (1997) referred to default interpretations of the verbal roots in sentences with few other temporal cues.

6. Chierchia (1995) offered yet another possibility: Genericity is marked by an explicit verbal morpheme, a habitual morpheme *hab*, which can take diverse morphological realizations, depending on the language. In Spanish, this would be imperfect morphology. In the spirit of much recent work in the structure of Inflection, this morpheme can be taken to be a functional head in an aspectual projection. The semantically relevant characteristic of *hab* is that of carrying an agreement feature requiring the presence of a generic operator *Gen* in its specifier. This generic operator is a phonologically null, quantifier adverb.

7. Time of exposure to Spanish in a Spanish-speaking country was intermittent for most speakers. For example, many speakers spent several summers abroad, 3 months at a time. Others spent 2 years, later came back to an English-speaking environment for 4 years, and went back to a Spanish-speaking country for another 4 years. Therefore, the amount of time spent was calculated by adding all these intermittent periods of time per subject.

8. The DELEs (Diplomas of Spanish as a Foreign Language) are the official accreditation of the degree of fluency in the Spanish language, issued and reorganized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport of Spain. The DELEs are divided into three levels: CIE (*Certificado Inicial de Español*) for intermediate level, DBE (*Diploma Básico de Español*) for high-intermediate level, and DSE (*Diploma Superior de Español*) for superior level. For more information, see <http://www.dele.org>.

9. The two NSs who received a score of 3.5 hesitated more than the other NSs in responding to interview questions.

10. Additionally, we used a cloze test to establish that all participants knew the morphological distinction between preterite and imperfect forms. This test consisted of a written narrative with 30 blanks (15 each for preterite and imperfect) based on a test used by Salaberry (1997). All the groups performed well above 90% accuracy on this task, and the range of scores of the near-native speakers was identical to those of the NSs. A one-way ANOVA showed significant differences between the four groups, $F(3, 80) = 3.69$, $p < .015$, and a Tukey’s HSD procedure identified the difference between the near-native speakers and the advanced learners. There were no differences among the NSs, the near-natives, and the superior group.

11. An anonymous *SSLA* reviewer wondered whether we had oral data available. Indeed, half of the subjects had completed a narrative-retelling task in the past, which we did not include in the analysis. The results of these narratives indicated that the L2 speakers were almost as accurate as the NSs in production, but not all the conditions tested in the interpretation tasks were produced spontaneously. For a discussion of this task with other bilinguals, see Montrul (2002).

12. Sentences with activities were hard to construct, and the responses with the two tenses yielded contradictory interpretations most of the time.

- (i) *María corrió por una hora pero no corrió.*
María run-PRET for an hour but not run-PRET
“Maria ran for an hour but she did not run.”

- (ii) *María corría por una hora pero no corrió.*
María run-IMPF for an hour but not run-RET
 “Maria ran for an hour but she did not run.”

Sentence (i) is illogical, and sentence (ii) is also illogical if the imperfect tense entails habituality. It could only be logical if the imperfect is interpreted as a modal meaning intention, like *was going to*. Because of these difficulties, we decided to exclude activity predicates for this experiment.

13. Of course, as in English, there are some exceptions depending on the pragmatic context: *Juan está teniendo problemas estos días* “Juan is having problems these days” or *La situación de estos días no me está gustando nada* “I am not liking the situation of these days.” We are grateful to an anonymous *SSLA* reviewer for reminding us of these cases.

14. Bruhn de Garavito (1999) and van Wuijtswinkel (1994) also reported on successful near-native speakers not immersed in a country where the target language is spoken.

15. We do not intend to claim that, because participants were not asked to give explicit discussions as to why they chose one response over another, our tests tapped competence more directly than Coppiters’s (1987) test instrument. After all, any type of instrument we employ in psycholinguistic experiments can only give us performance data on a given task. These performance data can only indirectly tell us something about linguistic competence but do not tap competence directly. This is true of NSs and NNSs alike.

16. Note that achievement predicates in the imperfect—a condition that may be odd for some speakers according to the theoretical account we assumed—reflect precisely this fact. Not all NSs agreed here. A similar range of variation was found with the near-native subjects.

17. An anonymous *SSLA* reviewer pointed out that because most of the NSs in the control group were not tested abroad, perhaps their L1 knowledge is affected by exposure to English. We should note, though, that these were very recent arrivals in the United States, with less than 2 years of residence. Given that 9 of the 12 NSs from Argentina were tested abroad, we split the NS group into two groups (abroad [$n=9$] vs. U.S. [$n=11$]), and we ran a series of *t*-tests and ANOVAs on their scores on all tests. We found no statistical differences between the two groups.

18. Unlike the Johnson and Newport (1989) and Birdsong (1992) studies, we did not run correlations between biographical variables and performance on the main tasks simply because factors like age, age of first exposure, years of residence, or numbers of years of study were found not to correlate with proficiency in those studies. We are not implying here that biographical data of this sort is not useful in disentangling the possible effects found in maturational studies. Indeed, recent studies have found that variables such as L2 use (Birdsong & Molis, 2001), test modality (Bialystock & Miller, 1999), verbal ability (DeKeyser, 2000), and education (Flege, Yeni-Komshian, & Liu, 1999) are predictive of success in L2 acquisition. We only looked at length of naturalistic exposure, knowing that previous research has shown age of arrival (i.e., age of initial exposure) to be a better predictor of nativelike achievement than length of exposure (Newport, 1990). Most of the subjects in the near-native and superior groups had spent more time in an environment where the target language was spoken ($M=5.7$ years, near-natives; $M=5.9$ years, superior group) than the subjects in the advanced group ($M=7.8$ months). Although most of the successful learners were found in the near-native group, a few near-natives that performed like NSs had only spent a total of 6 months on two occasions in a Spanish speaking country, as did the few advanced learners that scored like NSs. Therefore, as previous studies have shown, this variable is not a telling factor in the successful learners’ performance. Study after study has shown that the only factor that appears to correlate with proficiency is age of arrival in the country where the target language is spoken. However, given that the NNSs in our study were not tested abroad and were living in the United States, this variable is irrelevant in our case.

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APPENDIX A

TEST SENTENCES IN THE SENTENCE-CONJUNCTION JUDGMENT TASK (EXCLUDING DISTRACTORS)

In each pair, the underlined verb in the first sentence is in the imperfect tense and in the second sentence is in the preterite tense.

Achievements

1. *Los González vendían la casa pero nadie la compró.*
 “The González’s were selling their house but nobody bought it.”
Mis padres vendieron el auto pero nadie lo compró.
 “My parents sold their car but nobody bought it.”
2. *El equipo de Brasil ganaba el campeonato de fútbol pero salió segundo.*
 “The Brazilian team was winning the soccer championship but came up second.”
André Agassi ganó el campeonato de tenis pero salió segundo.
 “André Agassi won the tennis championship but came up second.”
3. *Carlos y Adriana se casaban ayer pero hoy siguen solteros.*
 “Carlos and Adriana were getting married yesterday but today they are still single.”
Julio y Verónica se casaron ayer pero hoy siguen solteros.
 “Julio and Veronica got married yesterday but today they are still single.”
4. *El tren partía de la estación central pero salió de la estación nueva.*
 “The train was leaving from the central station but departed from the new station.”
El avión partió del aeropuerto JFK de Nueva York pero salió de La Guardia.
 “The plane left from JFK airport in New York but departed from La Guardia.”
5. *Lucía venía a buscar su ropa al lavadero pero nunca llegó.*
 “Lucia was coming to get her clothes to the laundry place but she never arrived.”
Alberto vinó a buscar los libros de metodología a mi oficina pero nunca llegó.
 “Alberto came to my office to get the methodology books but he never arrived.”
6. *Mi tío se moría de cáncer pero finalmente se recuperó.*
 “My uncle was dying of cancer but he finally got well.”
La abuela de Carla se murió de neumonía pero finalmente se recuperó.
 “Carla’s grandmother died of pneumonia but she finally got well.”
7. *El avión arribaba al aeropuerto a las 8 pero apareció a las 10.*
 “The plane was arriving at the airport at 8 but appeared at 10.”
El transatlántico arribó al puerto a las 10 pero apareció al mediodía.
 “The transatlantic arrived to the port at 10 but appeared at noon.”

States

1. *La película era a las 7 pero empezó a las 7:30.*
 “The movie was supposed to be at 7 but started at 7:30.”
La clase fue a las 10 pero empezó a las 10:30.
 “The class was at 10 but started at 10:30.”
2. *El yate me costaba \$1,000,000 pero no lo compré.*
 “The yacht cost \$1,000,000 but I didn’t buy it.”
El BMW me costó \$80,000 pero no lo compré.
 “The BMW cost \$80,000 but I didn’t buy it.”
3. *El concierto duraba hasta las 7 p.m. pero terminó a las 8 p.m.*
 “The concert was supposed to last until 7 p.m. but finished at 8 p.m.”
La reunión duró hasta las 6 p.m. pero terminó a las 6:30 p.m.
 “The meeting lasted until 6 p.m. but finished at 6:30 p.m.”

4. *El tren tardaba 3 horas en recorrer el camino pero lo hizo en 2.*
 “The train took 3 hours to travel the road but did it in 2.”
El camión tardó 3 horas en llegar a destino pero lo hizo en 2.
 “The truck took 3 hours to reach the destination but did it in 2.”
5. *Margarita contaba con la ayuda de Carlos para correr el sillón pero al final lo hizo sola.*
 “Margarita counted on Carlos’s help with moving the chair but in the end she did it on her own.”
Dolores contó con la ayuda de Pedro para la mudanza pero al final la hizo sola.
 “Dolores counted on Pedro’s help with moving the chair but in the end she did it on her own.”
6. *Nos faltaba una semana para terminar el proyecto pero lo pudimos terminar a tiempo.*
 “We needed one week to finish the project but we were able to finish it on time.”
Me faltarón 3 días para terminar la tesis pero pude terminarla antes.
 “I needed 3 more days to finish the thesis but I could finish it earlier.”
7. *Bastaba con calma para solucionar la situación pero no fue suficiente.*
 “Patience was enough to solve the situation but it was not sufficient.”
Bastó con paciencia para solucionar la situación pero no fue suficiente.
 “Patience was enough to solve the situation but it was not sufficient.”

Accomplishments

1. *Joaquín corría la carrera de Fórmula 1 pero no participó.*
 “Joaquín was going to participate in Formula 1 but he didn’t take part in it.”
Pedro corrió el maratón de Barcelona pero no participó.
 “Pedro ran the Barcelona marathon but he didn’t take part in it.”
2. *Amanda llevaba el paquete hasta el correo pero se le perdió en el camino.*
 “Amanda was carrying the package to the post office but lost it on the way.”
Julia llevó el sobre hasta la administración pero se le perdió en el camino.
 “Julia took the envelope to the administration building but lost it on the way.”
3. *Adrián tomaba una coca-cola y se le volcó la mitad sobre el pantalón.*
 “Adrian was drinking a coke and spilled half of it on his pants.”
Marcelo tomó una cerveza y se le volcó la mitad al suelo.
 “Marcelo drank a beer and spilled half of it on the floor.”
4. *La empresa constructora contruía un edificio pero no pudieron terminarlo.*
 “The building company was constructing a building but could not finish it.”
Los Fernández construyeron una casa pero no pudieron terminarla.
 “The Fernández’s built a house but could not finish it.”
5. *El novelista escribía un ensayo pero el ensayo no está terminado.*
 “The novelist was writing an essay but the essay is not written.”
El poeta escribió un poema pero el poema no está terminado.
 “The poet wrote a poem but the poem is not written.”
6. *Gonzalo leía un cuento por las noches pero no llegó al final.*
 “Gonzalo was reading a story in the evenings but didn’t reach the end.”
Juan leyó un libro por las noches pero no llegó al final.
 “Juan read a book in the evenings but didn’t reach the end.”
7. *Íbamos al lago pero nos quedamos en casa a causa de la tormenta.*
 “We were going to the lake but stayed at home due to the storm.”
Fuimos a la sierra pero nos quedamos en casa a causa del mal tiempo.
 “We went to the hills but stayed at home due to the bad weather.”

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLE OF STORIES FROM THE TRUTH-VALUE JUDGMENT TASK

Condition A: Change-of-Meaning Preterites

Stative interpretation. La navidad pasada Carmen hace una fiesta e invita a todos sus viejos amigos. Entre todos los invitados están Susana y Marcos, que no se ven muy seguido. Cuando Marcos conversa con Susana le pregunta por su familia. Susana le cuenta a Marcos que su familia está viviendo en Barcelona ahora.

Marcos conoció-PRET a Susana. F
 Marcos conocía-IMPF a Susana. T

Last Christmas Carmen gives a party for all her old high school friends. Among all the guests are Marcos and Susana, who don't see each other very often. When Marcos and Susana chat with each other, Marcos asks Susana about her family. Susana tells him that her family is now living in Barcelona.

Marcos met Susana (for the first time). F
 Marcos knew Susana. T

Eventive interpretation. Ana va a la boda de sus amigos Carlos y Carolina. Ana no tiene novio. Carolina le presenta a Roberto. Ana y Roberto bailan toda la noche.

Ana conocía-IMPF a Roberto. F
 Ana conoció-PRET a Roberto. T

Ana goes to the wedding of her friends Carlos and Carolina. Ana does not have a boyfriend. Carolina introduces Roberto to Ana. Ana and Roberto dance all night long.

Ana knew Roberto. F
 Ana met Roberto (for the first time). T

Condition B: Habitual versus One-Time Events

One-time event. Panchito era muy tímido y no tenía muchos amiguitos con quien jugar. Panchito pasaba todo el tiempo en su casa con su mamá. Ayer Panchito se reunió por primera vez con sus vecinitos para jugar y pasaron un rato muy agradable. Hoy Panchito se quedó nuevamente con su mamá.

Panchito jugaba-IMPF con sus vecinos. F
 Panchito jugó-PRET con sus vecinos. T

Panchito was very shy and he did not have many friends to play with. Panchito would spend time at home with his mother. Yesterday, for the first time, he got together with his neighbors to play and they had a very pleasant time. Today Panchito stayed with his mother again.

Panchito played with his neighbors. F
 Panchito played with his neighbors. T

Habitual. Laurita tenía muchos amiguitos y después de la escuela pasaba el tiempo en la casa de sus vecinos. Ayer se quedó en casa con su mamá y pasó un rato muy agradable.

Laurita jugaba-IMPF con sus vecinos. T
Laurita jugó-PRET con sus vecinos. F

Laurita had many friends and after school she would spend time at her neighbors' house. Yesterday Laurita stayed at home with her mother and had a very good time.

Laurita played with her neighbors. T
Laurita played with her neighbors. F

Condition C: Generic versus Specific Subject Interpretation

Generic. Según el periódico, el restaurante de la calle Jefferson era muy bueno y el servicio era excelente. Lamentablemente el restaurante cerró el verano pasado y nunca tuvimos la oportunidad de ir.

Se comía-IMPF bien en ese restaurante. T
Se comió-PRET bien en ese restaurante. F

According to the newspaper, the restaurant on Jefferson Street was very good and customers were always happy with the service. Unfortunately, the restaurant closed last summer and we never got to go.

One ate well at that restaurant. T
We ate well at that restaurant. F

Specific. Según la mayoría de la gente, el restaurante de la calle Jefferson era muy bueno y el servicio era excelente. Fuimos allí a celebrar el cumpleaños de Carlos y a todos nos gustó mucho. ¡Qué lástima que lo cerraron!

Se comía-IMPF bien en ese restaurante. T
Se comió-PRET bien en ese restaurante. T

According to most people's opinion, the restaurant on Jefferson Street was very good and the service was excellent. We went there to celebrate Carlos's birthday and we all liked it a lot. It's a pity that it closed!

One ate well at that restaurant. T
We ate well at that restaurant. T

**Author: Please answer these queries for
SSLA 25(3) Paper 302**

- Q1. Sorace 1995 not in references; 1997?
- Q2. Update for Birdsong, in press?
- Q3. Update for Birdsong, in press?
- Q4. Sorace 1997 not cited in text; 1995?