

Great Aspect-actions: Morphological encoding in Second Language Acquisition

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This study investigates whether second language (L2) learners of English can acquire aspectual restrictions on the non-finite complements of a subset of verbs, such as ‘believe,’ that can appear in Raising to Object configurations

1. *John believed Mary to paint a portrait.
2. John believed Mary to have painted a portrait.

Examples (1) and (2) differ in regard to whether aspect is morphologically-encoded (2) or non-morphologically-encoded (1).

In regard to the difficulty of acquiring morphologically-encoded or non-morphologically-encoded aspect, contrasting predictions are made by various theories in the field (Hawkins, 2003; Slabakova, 2008). First, the Bottleneck Hypothesis (Slabakova, 2008) predicts greater difficulty for morphologically-encoded aspect because it hypothesizes that the mapping between meaning and inflectional morphology is the limiting factor, or the “bottleneck”, of L2 acquisition. On the other hand, the Representational Deficit Hypothesis (Hawkins, 2003) predicts greater difficulty for non-morphologically-encoded aspect due to the difficulty of acquiring uninterpretable features not present in a learner’s first language (L1).

Contrasting these positions raises the question of whether there is a difference between morphologically-encoded and non-morphologically-encoded aspect. In this presentation, I discuss data regarding the acquisition of (1) and (2) by highly proficient L1 Spanish L2 English learners, and I present evidence that, while both can be acquired, there is reason to believe that morphologically-encoded aspect presents a greater challenge to the L2 learner.