

# A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF TENSE-ASPECT IN THE CATALAN/ENGLISH ORAL PRODUCTION OF A YOUNG BILINGUAL<sup>1</sup>

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This paper examines the Aspect Hypothesis based on spontaneous oral production data collected for a longitudinal case study of a child growing up bilingual in Catalan and English in a Catalan environment (see Pérez Vidal 1995; Juan Garau 1996). Our main purpose is to focus on the development of the child's tense and aspect morphology, over the period between 2;5 and 3;4,<sup>2</sup> within his overall verbal development. This is done for his two languages at similar stages of development measured in MLU,<sup>3</sup> which correspond to different ages, as the child's bilingual competence is unbalanced. We seek to clarify how developing inflections align with aspect and tense categories, and also whether this association varies for each of the child's two languages and whether it varies with respect to monolingual development. Results indicate that verbal development proceeds on very similar lines for both languages and according to the same pattern as monolingual acquisition. Both progressive and past inflections are initially restricted to verbs of a particular inherent aspect.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, it has been observed in studies of child language development that emerging verb inflections appear to function in ways distinct from the adult target language. Attempts to provide explanations for this innovative distribution of inflections have included several levels of constraints. This paper focuses on just one such level, the inherent aspect of the verb or the predicate. Explanations given to the fact that nascent verbal inflections seem to be controlled to a large extent by the aspectual distinctions inherent in the verb or the predicate have been the Aspect Hypothesis —also referred to as the Defective Tense Hypothesis (Weist 1986; Andersen 1989; Shirai and Andersen 1995)— and the Primacy of

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the study, child age is expressed in years and months, with both figures being separated by a semi-colon.

<sup>3</sup> MLU, which stands for *Mean Length of Utterance*, is a widely used measurement of child utterance complexity (for further details see Brown 1973).

Aspect Hypothesis (Robison 1990). They share the idea that as inflections emerge in the child's production they are not evenly distributed across different types of verbs. In the acquisition of English, it has appeared that past tense morphology is most frequently used with predicates denoting *punctual* or *completive* situations, as in (1) below, and that the present participle associates more with situations of indefinite duration, as in (2) below, distributed across all verbs, but, as Robison (1995: 344) explains, "they [developing verb inflections] redundantly mark inherent—or lexical— aspect, the temporal features resident in the lexical meaning of the predicate":

- (1) It's fallen off.
- (2) It's crying.

This association of inflectional morphology with inherent aspect in child language acquisition has been put forward by several authors (Bronckart and Sinclair 1973; Antinucci and Miller 1976; Aksu 1978; Smith 1983; Weist 1986; Bloom and Harner 1989; Schlyter 1990—with bilingual children; Robison 1995; Shirai and Andersen 1995). As for the acquisition of Catalan, there exist several fairly recent studies dealing with the acquisition of tense and aspect by bilingual children acquiring Catalan and Spanish (Cortés and Vila 1991; Capdevila and Llinás 1997; Bel 1999).

This paper examines the Aspect Hypothesis based on spontaneous oral production data collected for a longitudinal case study of a child growing up bilingual in Catalan and English in a Catalan environment (see Pérez Vidal 1995; Juan Garau 1996). Our main purpose is to focus on the development of the child's tense and aspect morphology, over the period between 2;5 and 3;4, within his overall verbal development. This is done for his two languages at similar stages of development measured in MLU, which correspond to different ages, as the child's bilingual competence is unbalanced.<sup>4</sup>

We intend to clarify the following questions:

1. How developing inflections align with aspect and tense categories.
2. Whether this association varies for each of the two languages of the child.
3. Whether this association varies with respect to monolingual development.

We hypothesise that:

1. His development in English is going to follow the same pattern of development as in monolingual acquisition. Namely, past tense inflections are first going to be associated with just one category, perfectivity, and present participle inflections with imperfectivity, only to spread later to other categories.

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<sup>4</sup> Or, as other authors have put it, Catalan is his dominant language (Lanza 1997; Nicoladis and Genesee 1998).

2. His development in Catalan is also going to follow the same pattern of development as in monolingual acquisition, which initially points to the same pattern of development as in English, although the available evidence for this language is limited and controversial.

3. His development in Catalan and English in the domain of tense and aspect is going to be unbalanced, as his general course of development is.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The discussion around tense and aspect distinctions and their reflection in verb morphology revolves around three distinct linguistic categories: tense, grammatical aspect and lexical —or inherent— aspect. These categories operate binary distinctions.

*Tense*: It locates a situation in relation to some other point in time. We typically choose the time of speaking (Speech Time) as the reference point in time. For this reason, tense has been considered a deictic category (Comrie 1985). Tense marking can be either past or non-past.

*Grammatical aspect*: It encompasses the ways in which the internal constituency of a situation is viewed, independent of its relation to any reference time. It is a distinction marked explicitly by linguistic devices, usually auxiliaries and inflections. The English progressive exemplifies this type of aspect. It is also called *viewpoint aspect* (Smith 1983). Grammatical aspect indicates perfectivity and imperfectivity, and focuses on contrasts such as durative/non-durative, complete/incomplete, initial stage/final stage of action.

*Lexical aspect* —also *Aktionsart*, *situation aspect* (Smith 1983), or *semantic aspect* (Comrie 1976): It refers to features inherent in a particular conception of a situation as expressed by the verbs, independent of any grammatical marking or time frame. As Robison (1995: 346) clearly explains, "lexical aspect resides in the 'sense' of a predicate, not in its 'reference' nor in an isolated verb, as has sometimes been implied". For example, *run* and *run a mile* may both refer to the same situation. The first, however, has an atelic sense. It conceives the running to have indefinite duration. The second one has a definite duration determined by the length of a mile, hence a telic sense.

There are three notions underlying lexical aspect, as identified by Comrie (1976):

1. *Stative / dynamic*: Stative predicates describe involuntary situations that need no energy to continue (e.g. *know*). Dynamic predicates denote situations that require a constant infusion of energy (e.g. *write*).

2. *Telic / atelic*: A telic predicate conceives a situation as having a well-defined endpoint that inheres in the nature of the situation (e.g. *spill*). An atelic predicate indicates only an arbitrary terminus (e.g. *walk*).

3. *Punctual / durative*: Punctual predicates denote events perceived as being instantly finished (e.g. *kick*). Durative predicates refer to situations conceived of as lasting for some time (e.g. *sing*).

These three contrasts appear to have an implicational relationship that can lead to the linear fourfold classification of lexical aspect proposed by Vendler (1967), which can be found in most of the literature pertaining to the Aspect Hypothesis. It distinguishes between state verbs and three types of dynamic or action verbs: achievement verbs, accomplishment verbs, and activity verbs. Achievements take place instantaneously and are reducible to a single point in time, e.g. *find*, *throw*, *arrive*, *recognise*, and *reach*. Accomplishments have some duration, but have a single clear inherent endpoint, e.g. *run* or *swim (a mile)*, *draw (a circle)*, *buy*, and *change*. Activity verbs have an arbitrary endpoint and some duration, e.g. *talk (for a while)*.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Subject

The subject under investigation, Andreu, has been exposed to his two languages from birth so his is a case of bilingual first language acquisition, as some authors have called it (Meisel 1985; De Houwer 1990). His father has always addressed him in English and his mother in Catalan. Catalan is also the language of the schools he has been attending since the age of 1;3, and the mainstream language of the community where he was born and lives, the city of Barcelona.<sup>5</sup> All in all, we have estimated that Andreu has been exposed to Catalan for approximately two thirds of the time during our study, whereas English predominates in the remaining third, with a minimal presence of Spanish. This pattern of exposure explains Andreu's dominance in Catalan.

#### 3.2. Procedure

Data for the analysis are part of Andreu's combined corpus (Pérez Vidal 1995; Juan Garau 1996), which consists of 87 recordings of the boy playing indoors with his father and mother, and covers the period between 1;3 and 4;2. Two samples for each of his two languages have been analysed, as they show the maximum differences between one another, and hence the child's greatest improvement, and reflect what we have called his Early and Late Development. The MLUM for his Early Development is 2.24, which corresponds to age 2;5 in Catalan and age 3;2 in English, whereas the MLUM for his Late Development is 3.21. This MLUM has been recorded at 2;8 in Catalan contexts and at 3;4 in English ones.

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<sup>5</sup> Even though Spanish has always been present in Andreu's background, it has been so to a much lesser degree than Catalan during his first three years of life. As a result, Spanish has practically had no reflection in Andreu's early productions. His receptive abilities in that language, which must have been developing considerably during that time, are beyond the scope of the present investigation.

On the light of the Aspect Hypothesis, and following Vendler's (1967) fourfold classification, all predicates on the four samples have been classified according to the inherent lexical aspect of the verb forms. The forms included are those for which the child demonstrates analytic control of the inflection. Imitative repetitions as well as formulaic expressions have been left out.

#### 4. RESULTS

The analysis of the data shows the following results, which are grouped for each of both samples and languages as Early Development and Late Development.

##### 4.1. Early Development: English

Types= 9	Tokens= 38	Perfective	Imperfective
<b>Achievement Accomplishment</b>			
<i>'s fallen</i>	2	+	-
<i>'s jumped</i>		+	-
<i>'s stuck</i>	7	+	-
<i>'s stopped</i>	2	+	-
<i>'s coming</i>	3	-	+
<b>Activity</b>			
<i>'s biting</i>	2	-	+
<i>'s crying</i>	3	-	+
<i>'s running</i>	2	-	+
<b>State</b>			
<i>Be</i>	13		

*Table 1. Andreu's expanded English verb forms at 3;2 classified according to inherent lexical aspect*

At 3;2, Andreu's general linguistic development in English is highly idiosyncratic. It is important to note that at this point his productive use of the language is quite limited. In fact, the child's linguistic productions in English three months earlier (2;11) can be summarised as follows: 86 utterances containing 1 word—84 containing nouns and adjectives, plus 2 utterances containing the imperatives *put* and *look*; 3 utterances containing 2 words consisting of determiner and noun

(*the/another bear, the/a people, the/a man*); and 2 utterances containing 3 words (*pick a man and that's a horsie*).<sup>6</sup> His Catalan, on the other hand, consists of 289 lexical items.

Table 1 above displays Andreu's expanded verb forms (6.32% of the total number of verb forms) classified according to lexical aspect.

It should be noted that they are all marked for aspect, except *be*, of which he has 13 tokens. Any other verb forms, like simple present, simple past or future, are absent in the child's production at this stage. Thus, it can be stated that all his verb forms are marked for aspect, and not for tense.

All verbs which are telic, that is, having an inherent endpoint, and belonging to the achievement categories, have perfective ending. There is one exception: *come*, which, following Shirai and Andersen (1995: 753) is considered achievement, but an atypical one "since it can focus on the beginning point, the process or on the endpoint, depending on the context", and yet has progressive marking.

Thus, all atelic verbs (i.e. activity verbs) that have an arbitrary endpoint and whose situation has, at any moment, the same structure, have progressive aspectual marking. The exception is *biting*: it is essentially an achievement verb, but it is used iteratively in the context just described.

Dynamic verbs are used either in the perfective, to denote completed, punctual actions with end results, or in the progressive, to denote actions in process. It seems as if these were the two types of actions that the subject can handle cognitively. Furthermore, stative verbs are not marked for the progressive.

The child seems to be operating with two binary systems of which he is only using one of the two possible alternatives. He seems to be using the *resulting past* with a non-specific time reference, where the proximity or result is what matters, as opposed to a time-specific past in which proximity, which he never uses, is not necessary. He also makes use of the progressive present indicating durativity, as opposed to a non-progressive, which would indicate perfectivity, which again he never uses. This partly coincides with Bickerton's (1981, in Robison 1995: 347) explanation which claims that "language ontogenesis demonstrates the operation of two aspectual distinctions, and that children use *-ing* to mark durativity and irregular past forms to mark punctuality", the latter being understood as perfectivity, according to Robison. The context in which the utterances take place provide further evidence in this direction, as is illustrated in the following excerpts, in which the child uses the verbs in Table 1.

Andreu (3;2) and his father (A and F) are playing indoors with Sooty, a puppet, and other animals.

(1)  
F Here he comes.

<sup>6</sup> The proportion between both this figure and the 89 items in English closely matches the proportion between the amount of input he receives in English and Catalan, 1/3 versus 2/3, respectively.

A Oh, it's *fallen* off!  
 F It's fallen off?  
 A It's *fallen* off.

(2)  
 F Andreu, look, a tiger!  
 A Oh, oh!  
 A It's *stuck*.  
 F Quick, help!  
 F Here we are, help.

(3)  
 F Come up here, he says.  
 F Look, oh, a tiger!  
 F Run away!  
 A It not *coming*?  
 F It's not coming?  
 A No.  
 A It's *stopped*.  
 F It's stopped?  
 A Yes.

Results from other studies are to a great extent similar, with some minor differences. On the one hand, our subject seems to be developing at a slower rate, than, for instance, the quickest subjects in Shirai and Andersen's (1995) study, but at a similar rate than the slowest one: Adam is 3;10 when he reaches Brown's Stage III, whereas Andreu is 3;3. On the other hand, the speed at which changes take place seems slower in the case of our subject. In the aforementioned study (Shirai and Andersen 1995: 755), the authors find that "the results for the progressive and past inflection are basically the same. The only difference is that the stage of restriction ends earlier for the progressive than for the past". That is, the progressive develops more quickly than the past. When children are using the progressive with the four types of verbs, the past is still only used with achievements. We cannot see this happening at this stage of Andreu's development yet.

#### 4.2. Early Development: Catalan

At the age of 2;5, where this study begins, Andreu does not as yet mark tense distinctions. At this point he has only produced a single past tense form in a non-imitative repetition: *Aquí (està) el cotxe (que) va regalar (el) Paul* [Here is the car that Paul gave]. However, this is an isolated example of a periphrastic past simple form in Catalan the use of which, as we will see later, is not even productively established by 2;8, when the second sample is taken. At 2;5, the child is using imperatives (particularly *mira* and *té* [look, take]) and present bound morphology (forms of *be*: *està, estan, és; menja, juga, cau*). Table 2 below presents his expanded Catalan verb forms at this age classified according to inherent lexical aspect. As in the case of the first English sample, we find that the only two expanded forms which

appear in this sample are in accordance with the dual pattern that associates achievement verbs such as *caure* [fall] with a perfective form, to indicate the completion of a punctual action with an end result, and activity verbs such as *plorar* [cry] with the progressive aspect indicating duration. Our evidence at this stage is scanty and, although results point in the direction just indicated, unconvincing since the verb *caure* [fall] is also used at the time in the present tense to express that he does not want something to fall down, which seems to indicate that it is not exclusively linked to a perfective aspect. Cortés and Vila (1991), in a study of a monolingual Catalan child and two bilingual Spanish/Catalan ones, acknowledge the same initial tendency to associate activity verbs with imperfective or progressive forms and achievement or accomplishment verbs with perfective tenses in their subjects. Nevertheless, they also find evidence to suggest that verb forms are not exclusively linked to semantically-related verbs. On these grounds, they reject the Primacy of Aspect Hypothesis and embrace the idea that tense and aspect develop at the same time. Like Andreu, one of their bilingual subjects, M<sup>a</sup> del Mar, also alternates *ha caigut* [has fallen] and *cae/caigo* [(it) is falling, (I) fall], while Sara, bilingual, and Roger, monolingual Spanish, produce similar examples of alternating forms.

Types= 2	Tokens= 2	Perfective	Imperfective
<b>Achievement Accomplishment</b>			
<i>Ha caigut</i> [has fallen]	1	+	-
<b>Activity</b>			
<i>Plorant</i> [crying]	1	-	+

Table 2. Andreu's expanded Catalan verb forms at 2;5 classified according to inherent lexical aspect

The following examples illustrate the context in which the utterances are produced.

Andreu (2;5) and his mother (A and M) are playing indoors.

- (1)  
 M Hola [Hello].  
 M Què està fent [What does it do]?  
 A *Plorant* [Crying].  
 M Està plorant [Is it crying]?

- (2)  
 A Pumba [interj.]!  
 A Ha caigut [It has fallen]!  
 = a pile of straw bales has fallen down



- A Pumba [interj.]!  
 M Ha caigut [It has fallen]!  
 A No.  
 M No.  
 M Ha caigut [It has fallen]!

#### 4.3. Late Development: English

Types= 12	Tokens= 20	Perfective	Imperfective
<b>Achievement Accomplishment</b>			
<i>Stuck</i>	1	+	-
<i>Finished</i>	2	+	-
<i>Gone</i>	1	+	-
<i>Hurt</i>	3	+	-
<i>Coming</i>	1	-	+
<i>Doing 'some pooh- pooh'</i>	1	-	+
<i>Waking up</i>	1	-	+
<i>Finding</i>	1	-	+
<b>Activity</b>			
<i>Crying</i>	4	-	+
<i>Sleeping</i>	2	-	+
<i>Hurting</i>	1	-	+
<b>State</b>			
<i>Got</i>	2	+	-

Table 3. Andreu's expanded English verb forms at 3;4 classified according to inherent lexical aspect

Andreu's verbal expansions in English at this stage, when he is 3;4, appear below. There are several new verb forms in his production: present forms such as *catches*, *touches* and *likes*; immediate future forms such as *gonna bite* and *wanna go*; and two instances of past *was* which may be analysed as formulaic. Contracted auxiliaries abound and uncontracted auxiliaries are not scarce any more.

Expanded verb forms are shown in Table 3, classified according to their inherent lexical aspect. Results show that Andreu is already well into the stage in which the progressive is no longer restricted to activity verbs, but already being extended to other verbs. He uses *-ing* with verbs that indicate achievement, and activity verbs decrease. Thus, the restriction of past marking to verbs with the semantic features of [+telic, +punctual, +result] begins to weaken. There is no incorrect use of the progressive extended to state verbs.

The following excerpts illustrate the verb forms in context.

Andreu (3;4) is playing indoors with his father (A and F).

- (1)  
 F Come on, you tell him what you do.  
 A There's no monster.  
 A He's *gone* away the monster.
- (2)  
 F Where's Sooty?  
 A He's in my room.  
 F In your room, is he?  
 A Yeah, in my room.  
 M What's he doing there?  
 A He's sleeping.

#### 4.4. Late Development: Catalan

Table 4 below presents Andreu's expanded forms in Catalan at age 2;8. At this later stage in development, the child continues to make wide use of the imperative and the present tense only. There are some infinitives in his production as well, but no examples of the past simple in the sample analysed. Whereas in English he is beginning to loosen the association between inherent lexical aspect and verb forms, the expanded forms in the Catalan sample still present that connection. In the case of the examples in the progressive, the auxiliary *està* [*be*], which was absent in *plorant* [crying], in Andreu's Early Development, is now adequately used.

The following excerpts illustrate the verb forms in context.

Andreu (2;8) is playing indoors with his mother (A and M)

- (1)  
 M No, aquest, no en trenquis un altra, home  
 [no, this one, don't break another one, come on]!  
 M Jo haig d'arreglar aquest, eh [I have to fix this one, eh].  
 A S'ha trencat [It has broken].  
 M S'ha trencat [It has broken].
- (2)

- M Què fa el llop [What does the wolf do]?.  
 A *Està corrent* [It's running].  
 = It is running along the road  
 M Sí, està corrent, se'n va, eh [Yes, it's running, it's going, eh].  
 A Sí, se'n va [Yes, it's going].

Types= 5	Tokens= 6	Perfective	Imperfective
<b>I. Achievement Accomplishment</b>			
<i>S'ha trencat</i>	2	+	-
<i>He fet</i>	1	+	-
<i>Ha menjat</i>	1	+	-
<b>Activity</b>			
<i>Està corrent</i>	1	-	+
<i>Està dormint</i>	1	-	+

Table 4. Andreu's expanded Catalan verb forms at 2;8 classified according to inherent lexical aspect

## 5. DISCUSSION

From the results for this Early Development, we can draw the following general description. Andreu's initial verb morphology development proceeds on very similar lines for both his languages. The past/perfective inflection is restricted to achievement verbs that bear the following semantic characteristics [+telic, +punctual, +result]. The progressive inflection is restricted to activity verbs and iterative achievements. Thus, the results for progressive and past inflections are basically the same. They are both initially restricted to verbs of a particular inherent aspect. This is so because inherent aspect or *Aktionsart* is part of the lexical meaning—or more generally of the event and scenario referred to by the verb—and a consequence of the semantics of the verb to which morphemes are attached. It could hence be said that the meaning of the individual verb plays a crucial role in early verbal development (see also Tomasello 1992).

These results coincide with findings in studies with monolingual children acquiring English, Catalan and other languages (Antinucci and Miller 1976; Bloom and Harner 1989; Cortés and Vila 1991; Shirai and Andersen 1995), and with other bilingual studies (e.g. Schlyter 1990). In an initial stage, the child is using aspectual marking restricted to particular classes of verbs: those that indicate proximity relations. It could also be said that, in his verb forms, both the lexical aspect and tense are constructed one within another and the grammatical morphemes depend on the semantic features of the verb to which they are attached. Later on, in his Late

Development, these morphemes expand to other cases, which differ from the prototype. One difference that is rather revealing of the process of bilingual acquisition, with respect to monolingual acquisition, was mentioned in Andreu's Early Development. Whereas in the initial use of verbal inflections by children the progressive develops more quickly than the past (Brown 1973), the same cannot be said of our data, since when the use of the perfective is restricted so is the use of the progressive. And the restriction only disappears in our subject's Late Development, at a later stage.

The explanation of Prototypes suggested by some authors (e.g. Shirai and Andersen 1995) claims that children acquire a linguistic category starting with the prototype of the category and later expand it to less prototypical cases. This is what Andreu has done: first mark verbs that are [+punctual, +telic, +result] as past instances, and activities and iterative achievements with the progressive, only to extend the inflections to other verbs later in the case of the progressive. The data do not show whether the same happens with the past. It could be predicted that this is what is going to happen in subsequent samples.

When looking at contrasts between the child's development in Catalan and in English, three phenomena stand out in our subject's general pattern. In the first place, at an initial stage, with an MLUm of 2.24, imperatives and present forms, frequent in Catalan Early Development, are scarce in English. This difference, however, disappears in his Late Development, when the child has an MLUm of 3.21. In the second place, past tenses are almost totally absent in both languages for both times, with only one exception in his Late Development in English. In the third place, the lapse in age at which changes occur is a constant feature in his bilingual development. Andreu's is a case of unbalanced bilingualism, and this is evident in the particular domain analysed in the present study: his English lags six months behind his Catalan at both stages of development, when his MLU is 2.24, and when it is 3.21. In a different domain, an interesting feature of his production is noticeable and deserves further analysis. His production in English, although lagging behind his Catalan one, is clearly more verbose and rich, both in lexical types and topic initiation moves. This seems to represent some evidence for the Bridge Theory formulated by Gleason (1975) according to which fathers, because they are less familiar with the young child's communicative devices than are mothers, require the child to make communicative adjustments in order to convey her/his message to this less familiar partner. In short, fathers are challenging communicative partners for young children and serve as a kind of linguistic 'bridge' to the wider community of adult speakers. Subsequent studies have extended Gleason's hypothesis to include the role played by siblings in the home (see, for example, Barton and Tomasello 1994).

Thus, it can be concluded that for the subject under investigation, the process of acquiring two languages simultaneously proceeds in very similar ways, although showing the dominance which was hypothesised, given that his overall bilingual acquisition is unbalanced. With respect to monolingual acquisition, each of his two languages develops according to the same pattern as monolingual acquisition,

although at a somewhat slower rate. For our subject, following the route of development in two languages apparently involves an effort that he can only surmount at the cost of rate.

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