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# Cross-linguistic influence in the acquisition of tense-aspect in L3 English

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A proposal for the study of L2 to L3 transfer in  
the use of English simple past by  
L1 Italian / L2 Spanish classroom learners

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## **Abstract**

The acquisition of tense/aspect marking constitutes a major difficulty in foreign language learning, as different languages differ in the ways temporal concepts are encoded. Prior language knowledge seems to play a decisive role in the development of learners' interlanguage and, particularly, in the shaping of verbal systems. Thus, cross-linguistic influence -i.e. the transfer of knowledge from the L1 and other previously acquired languages- is considered a significant factor in the acquisition of tense/aspect morphology. This paper presents a proposal for the empirical study of the transfer of knowledge about the preterite/perfect opposition from L2 Spanish to L3 English among L1 Italian students in a classroom setting. A deeper understanding of transfer phenomena will allow teachers to make better use of a strategy spontaneously employ.

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## **0. Introduction and structure**

We will start this section by presenting the aims of this Research Project and exposing what were the reasons that stimulated the writing of a dissertation on the topic of cross-linguistic influence on the acquisition of L3 English. Then, we will comment its structure.

### **0.1. Aims and motivation**

Foreign language acquisition is an everyday phenomenon. In a globalized world such as ours, speakers of different languages come into contact in everyday life. As a consequence of these interactions all over the world people are acquiring languages other than their native language, both consciously and unconsciously. Some of this learning is done in a classroom situation, some in a naturalistic environment. One of the factors affecting the acquisition process and outcome is prior language knowledge, which includes the knowledge of the native language (L1) and other foreign languages (L2), as well as the metalinguistic knowledge the speaker has developed as a result of using and acquiring those languages.

The influence of L1 and L2 knowledge in the acquisition and use of a third language (L3) is usually referred to as *language transfer* and constitutes one of the most relevant factors in foreign language acquisition (FLA). This work studies the topic of language transfer from the L2 to the L3 in a particular area, tense-aspect acquisition, which seems to be a major source of trouble for any foreign language student.

The main goal of this dissertation is to establish whether from a theoretical point of view there is ground for an empirical research on transfer from L2 Spanish to L3 English in the use of simple past tense by Italian students. In addition to this, I aim to determine the nature of the difficulties shown by those students by contrastively comparing the languages involved. Contrastive analysis has been widely applied to foreign language teaching and it is an essential task to carry out in order to reach a deep understanding of transfer phenomena. As teachers we have the duty of taking advantage of any available resource in order to increase our students' chances of successful language acquisition. Transfer is been proved to be a tool every learner spontaneously uses. Consequently, it would be both irresponsible and silly to ignore the potential of cross-linguistic influence for language teaching.

The idea of this dissertation occurred to me as a result of my experience as a Spanish teacher and speaker, on one hand, and a Romance Philology former student, on the other hand. Thus, the present perfect / past simple opposition was chosen for two main reasons. The

first is that the Spanish the *pretérito perfecto* is typically used mistakenly by my Italian students, who tend to overuse it at the expenses of the *pretérito indefinido*. This circumstance made think that they were likely to have similar problems with English Present Perfect. The second one is related to my own experience as speaker of a certain variety of Spanish, that typical of Asturias, according to which I used to show a distinct preference for the simple past tense that I started overcoming when I firstly came into contact with English learning when I was twelve years old. I can clearly remember how I compared what my English teacher told me about the English Present Perfect with the Spanish Pretérito Perfecto people used on television.

My studies of Romance Philology, which involved the simultaneous acquisition of three foreign Romance languages (Italian, Portuguese and French), put me on the track of language transfer. There is no doubt that the linguistic proximity between those languages had a facilitating role in their acquisition. The evolution of my L1 demonstrated that language transfer was not limited to typologically similar languages. I had both the elements: the transfer phenomenon between not close-related languages (from the L2 of the L1, in my case) and the area of application (simple and compound past tenses opposition). What would happen if those elements were combined in a different way? In other words, it is possible to transfer knowledge about simple and compound past tenses opposition from the L2 to the L3?

## **0.2. Overview**

This dissertation consists of three chapters and is divided into two main parts, a theoretical part (chapters 1 and 2) and a study proposal (chapter 3) that can be consider a conclusive chapter as it summarizes and gives practical direction to the former chapters.

Chapter 1 reviews the notion of cross-linguistic influence. First, the concept of cross-linguistic influence is delimited (section 1.1.). Secondly, the role attributed to transfer within the different approaches adopted in the field of second language acquisition is discussed (section 1.2. and subsections). Bearing in mind that cross-linguistic influence is not the only factor affecting FLA process, the main factors possibly affecting this phenomenon are then discussed (section 1.3. and subsections). Focus is placed, on the fourth place, on the peculiarities of L2 to L3 transfer (section 1.4.), the variables determining its occurrence (subsection 1.4.1.) and, particularly, the transfer of knowledge about tense and aspect (subsection 1.4.2.). Finally, the main issues treated in the chapter are summarized (section 1.5.).

In chapter 2, I give a survey of some selected features of the linguistic means for the expression of temporality in the source languages Italian and Spanish, and in the target language English. The chapter begins with a review of the concepts of time, tense and aspect (section 2.1.). The ways language learners face the difficulties posed by the divergences in the ways different languages encode time relations and a framework for the description of such divergences are also described (subsection 2.1.1. and 2.1.2.). A brief picture of past tense systems in the three languages is then drawn (sections 2.2., 2.3., and 2.4.). Finally, special attention is given to a cross-linguistic comparison of differences and similarities in the way temporal concepts are grammaticalized or not in these languages (section 2.5.). This “contrastive analysis” is taken into account while formulating some of the predictions for acquisition in the study proposal.

In the part devoted to the study proposal (chapter 3), I summarize the main implications of the issues treated in the preceding chapters (section 3.1.) in order to establish the theoretical ground for a future empirical research. Besides, I establish the aims of such study (section 3.2.) and elaborate the main research questions and hypotheses (section 3.3). I explain then background information regarding the experiment (section 3.4.). To conclude, I do some final remarks on the relevance and viability of the experiment as well as the main difficulties to the accomplishment of the actual experiment (section 3.5.).

## 1. Cross-linguistic influence: some basic aspects

As mentioned in the introduction and overview, the major objective of this Research Project is to deepen into the study of the possible effects learners' previously acquired languages may have on the use of certain English tenses. That is why we should devote some pages to the phenomenon of language transfer, which constitutes one of the most controversial aspects in FLA research (Manchón, 1998, cfr. Celaya, 1990:78).

The study of transfer phenomena in FLA has a long tradition and is considered a central area. The definition of the concept itself has been the object of much controversy since different linguistic phenomena have been presented under the label of '*language transfer*', as I will discuss in section 1.1. Consequently, the importance attributed to it has change according to the different general approaches dominating research in FLA, as we will see in section 1.2. I will devote section 1.3. to the discussion of the factors determining the degree and extend of language transfer under the light of current research. Although studies on language transfer used to focus primarily on the influence of a native language (L1) on the acquisition of a second language (L2), there is now a growing interest in the way previously learned non-native languages influence the acquisition of an additional language. I will focus on this in section 1.4. Finally, the conclusions of the chapter will be offered in section 1.5.

An important remark is now necessary. In talk about L1 and L2 it is implicitly assumed that L1 is the dominant language and that the level of proficiency in L2 must necessarily be lower than in L1. When a third language is acquired, however, the chronological order in which the three languages have been learnt does not necessarily correspond to the frequency of use or the level of competence in the trilingual speaker. In this paper, English as a L3 is understood from the point of view of competence: it is not the third language that a speaker comes into contact with in his or her biography, but the third one in level of proficiency. Indeed, as we will see in chapter 3, the subjects in our study proposal have acquired some basic knowledge of English before even starting the study of that which has become their L2. However, such a prior knowledge of English is considered too superficial and not relevant in relation to the area of language concerned in the research.

### 1.1. The concept of cross-linguistic influence

*Cross-linguistic influence* (CLI) is a term proposed in the eighties to include 'such phenomena as *transfer*, *interference*, *avoidance*, *borrowing* and *L2-related aspects of*



*language loss*' (Kellerman & Sharwood Smith, 1986:1). However, the notion itself was first proposed during the post-war years and has ever since been of interest to second language researchers, who used to refer to it as *language mixing* (Selinker, 1972; Kellerman, 1983), *linguistic interference* (Schachter & Rutherford, 1979; Ringbom, 1987), *language transfer* (Lado, 1957; Selinker, 1972; Kellerman, 1983; Odlin, 1989), *the role of the mother tongue and native language influence* (Master, 1987; Jarvis, 2000). In this paper, the terms *cross-linguistic influence* and *language transfer* will be used undifferentiated, as they are frequently used in recent FLA research. For a more detailed discussion on how different terms referring to CLI have been used in literature, see Romaine (1:51-55).

According to Odlin (1989:27), *language transfer* is 'the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired'. In other words, CLI can be defined as 'the influence of a person's knowledge of one language on that person's language knowledge or use of another language' (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008:1). Thus, language transfer does not only refer to transfer from the mother tongue, as the knowledge of other languages increases the possibilities of language transfer from these second languages.

'It sometimes seems as if sophisticated adult learners unconsciously classify their experience of languages and as a strategy prefer the hypothesis that a new second language is more likely to resemble a known second language than their native tongue.' (Corder, 1983:74)

CLI has been seen both as a facilitating and limiting factor in foreign language acquisition. *Interferences*, which are related to as negative transfer, are 'errors in the learner's use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue' (Lott, 1983:256). Some scholars think that negative transfer may actually impede learning (Noor, 1994). For Ringbom (1985:abstract), however, language transfer 'provides one basis for the learner to form and test hypotheses about the second language he or she is learning' and, consequently, cross-linguistic similarities may positively influence foreign language comprehension, learning, and production (2007:1-3). Accordingly, 'good language learners especially make efficient use of whatever cross-linguistic similarities they perceive' and where these similarities are not evident, learners have the tendency to assume similarities, which in many cases leads to errors, primarily in production (*ibid*:117).

Transfer can be regarded from different perspectives other than its effects on L2 production. Jarvis & Pavlenko (2008:20) provide a ten-dimension scheme to characterize CLI types (see the table below). One of the most outstanding features here is that this classification includes both conceptual and linguistic transfer, as research on FLA has broadly proved that

influence between languages exceeds the linguistic domain and also involves the transfer of conceptual knowledge.

<i>Area of language knowledge/use</i>	<i>Cognitive level</i>	<i>Intentionality</i>	<i>Channel</i>	<i>Manifestation</i>
phonological	linguistic	intentional	aural	overt
orthographic	conceptual	unintentional	visual	covert
lexical				
semantic				
morphological				
<i>Directionality</i>	<i>Type of knowledge</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Form</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
forward	implicit	productive	verbal	positive
reverse	explicit	receptive	nonverbal	negative
lateral				
bi- or multi-directional				

The consideration of CLI either as a positive or negative factor in language learning, i.e. the outcome dimension, is narrowly related to the different approaches adopted by FLA researchers. Even though the analysis of the history of FLA research largely exceeds the purpose of this paper, in section 1.2. I will briefly summarize the development undergone by this concept, without analyzing in detail the postulates of any linguistic approach or theory, as I just want to provide an overall vision of transfer research. This is an essential step to take if we want to understand the notion of CLI and be able to show its relevance in relation to the study proposal presented chapter 3.

A final remark is now necessary. The terms *forward transfer* and *reverse/backward transfer* are already conventional in the literature (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008:21) and usually refer to L1 to L2 transfer and L2 to L1 transfer, respectively. They can be applied, however, to L2 to L3 transfer, L3 to L2 transfer and so forth. Grass & Selinker (2001:132) refer to cases of CLI from one post-L1 language to another post-L1 language as *interlanguage transfer*. Jarvis & Pavlenko (2008:22) prefer the term *lateral transfer* in order to avoid the theory-specific connotations of the term. In this paper I will use the term *lateral transfer* to refer to instances of CLI between two post-L1 languages whose status as L2 and L3 may be problematic, as we have already seen.

## 1.2. The role of cross-linguistic influence on FLA theories

Researchers have not always accepted the importance of the native and previously learned languages effect on FLA. According to Celaya (1990:82), we should differentiate the concept of transfer before and after the influence of Burt & Dulay's work (1975), which emphasised the role of FLA as a creative process on the part of the learner and, therefore, deny the departure-point role attributed to the L1 by behaviourist theories. Three phases can

be thus discerned when looking at transfer research over the years (Gass, 1996): in the first, under the effects of behaviourism, the utmost importance was attributed to L1 in FLA; in the second, scholars ruled out L1 as the most influential factor in FLA; and finally, the current phase, is characterised by a reemergence in the study of CLI.

### **1.2.1. Language transfer in the behaviouristic theories**

According to Behaviourism, language learning was a habit formation process based on imitation (i.e. the stimulus is copied so often by the learner that it becomes automatic) and reinforcement (i.e. appropriate responses are rewarded and wrong responses are punished; consequently, only appropriated responses will ultimately be given by the learner). Besides, behaviourists assumed that learning in general was highly influenced by interference of prior knowledge and took place inductively through analogy rather than analysis. Thus, the learning of L2 would be influenced by the habits already set by L1, provided that ‘individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture’. (Lado, 1957:2). Consequently, where the L1 and the L2 were similar, the L1 would aid the L2 learning process, functioning positively, and where both languages differed, the L1 would interfere, functioning negatively. This is precisely what was labelled as *language transfer*, either positive or negative (*interference*).

These researchers believed that teacher should focus their teaching on the predicted areas of difficulty, enforced by negative transfer. Contrastive Analysis (CA) was developed to enable the identifying of these problem areas. However, two positions can be distinguished in CA: according to the strong form, all errors could be predicted by comparison of the L1 and the L2; on the other hand, the weak form assumed that CA could just identify those errors which can be clearly attributed to the L1, as not all errors are result of interference.

### **1.2.2. The opposition to language transfer in FLA**

CA hypothesis finally lost ground in the 1970's due to the findings of such researchers as Burt & Dulay (1975), who firstly discarded the importance of habit-formation in language acquisition and set up an alternative approach to contrastive analysis known as the Creative Construction Hypothesis, also labelled as the L2=L1 Hypothesis. According to this theory, L2 acquisition proceeded in much the same way as L1 acquisition. Whereas the CA provided a transfer theory, the L2=L1 hypothesis suggested a process of active organization in the

learner's mind. Therefore, according to the innatist view of language acquisition supported by Burt & Dulay, neither the first nor second languages might have any significant influences on the FLA process, as the acquisition process would be the same for the first and any additional languages. Error Analysis (EA) arose then as an alternative to CA to account for the many errors that could not be explained as the result of transfer from the L1, bringing to light sources of errors other than L1-based and changing the notion of error itself into a positive one. Indeed, error is seen nowadays as one of the ways learners use to test their hypothesis about the language (Corder, 1981).

Burt and Dulay's line was not really followed in Europe, where the view that language transfer did not take place in FLA was not widely accepted since those researchers who investigated FLA in the classroom held the opposite point of view. Selinker's Interlanguage Hypothesis (1972) was instead widely spread. According to it, at any moment of the learning process the student builds up his or her own linguistic system which is located on an *interlanguage continuum* between the L1 and the target language and he or she moves along this continuum, gradually refining his or her mental model. Five central processes are responsible for this *interlanguage*: language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication and overgeneralization.

### **1.2.3. Recent perspectives on language transfer**

In the last decades researchers have made considerable progress to establish methods to study cross-linguistic influence and its occurrence in acquisition situations. The Michigan Conference on Language Transfer (1981) constituted a starting-point of new research on language transfer as it proved a change on the positions researched held at that time with respect to those widely supported in the 1970's. After disentangling from its behaviourist connotations, the new concept of transfer, labelled from now *cross-linguistic influence*, 'involves the use of native language (or other language) information in the acquisition of a second (or additional) language' (Gass, 1988:387). Transfer is not seen any longer as a separate entity which affects the acquisition of L2, but as one of the variables which determine the grammar of interlanguage (Wode, 1986) and as a feature resulting from learning strategies which characterizes interlanguage (Apple & Muysken, 1987).

To sum up, language transfer is seen nowadays as 'a real and central phenomenon that must be considered in any full account of the second language acquisition process' (Gass & Selinker, 1992:7). That is why it is of great significance to probe into this phenomenon and

get fully acquainted with the possible variables of L1 transfer in L2 acquisition. In section 1.3., I will review the factors which determine the occurrence and characteristics of CLI, focusing on those I think most relevant according to the objectives established for this paper in section 0.1., namely prototypicality, cross-linguistic similarity, and language level.

### **1.3. Variables affecting cross-linguistic influence**

After what we have seen in section 1.2., there is no doubt that CLI plays a major role in FLA. Nevertheless, we should not forget that the extent and type of language transfer vary depending on several variables which are frequently referred to as *constraints*, denoting anything that prevents the learner either from noticing cross-linguistic similarity or from deciding that such a similarity is a real and useful one.

In the 1980's, the shift of attention from transfer to transferability led scholars to determine the first classifications of these variables. According to Kellerman (1983), two general constraints governed the occurrence of CLI: psychotypology and transferability. The psychotypology constraint meant that transfer was more likely to occur when the L2 user perceived the L1 and the L2 as being similar, whereas the transferability constraint implied that structures perceived by the user as marked (or language-specific) were less likely to transfer. The Transfer-to-somewhere Principle (Andersen, 1983) stated that a language structure would be susceptible to transfer only if it was compatible with natural acquisitional principles or was perceived to have a similar counterpart (a *somewhere* to transfer to) in the recipient language. Even though empirical evidence seems to support both Kellerman's and Anderson's ideas, other factors have been found to affect transfer and transferability.

Several classifications (Rignbom, 1987; Odlin, 1989; Ellis, 2001) of the variables affecting language transfer have been proposed. All of them seem to have two things in common. First of all, the idea that factors affecting CLI do not act independently, but are interrelated. For example, Ringbom (1987) considers that language distance has an impact on cross-linguistic influence and that the influence of the L1 is greater at early stages of acquisition than at later stages, it is stronger at lower levels of proficiency, and it tends to be stronger in more communicative tasks. Singleton (1987) concluded that psychotypological factors seem to interact with a proficiency factor and an uncertainty factor. And, secondly, the existence of factors that depend on the learner and other variables that he or she cannot largely affect. Jarvis & Pavlenko (2008:175) adopt an individual-based perspective and divide the factors affecting CLI into five categories (see the table below).

<i>Jarvis &amp; Pavlenko's Category</i>	<i>The factors included in this category are...</i>	<i>This factor refers to...</i>	<i>The results of research in the area indicate that...</i>	<i>The most relevant studies are...</i>
<i>Linguistic and psycholinguistic factors</i>	Cross-linguistic similarity, or psychotypology	The relationship or degree of congruence between the languages involved.	The extent of transfer is highest when both languages are <i>perceived</i> to be similar by the L2 user.	Poulisse & Bongaerts (1994) Ringbom (2007)
	Area of language use, or language level	The traditional areas of language, i.e. phonology, orthography, lexis, semantics, morphology, syntax, discourse and pragmatics.	Transfer occurs in all subsystems, though its occurrence is complicated by the effects of factors such as cross-linguistic similarity or L2 proficiency.	Ellis (1994), Jarvis (2000)
	Frequency, recency, and salience	How frequent the feature is in both languages, the order of acquisition of the source languages and the degree to which the feature is noticeable.	The frequency with which a particular linguistic item or feature appears in the L1 increases its likelihood of being transferred to the L2. The language acquired just before the target language seems to be the most likely candidate for transfer.	Dewaele (1998) Poulisse & Bongaerts (1994) Jarvis (2002)
	Markedness and prototypicality	The degree to which a structure or meaning is prototypical (universal) versus aprototypical (language-specific).	L1 marked features have a tendency not to transfer to the L2, especially when the corresponding feature in the L2 is unmarked. Prototypicality can affect learners' intuitions about the transferability of word meanings and grammatical structures.	Zolb (1984) Kellerman (1978, 1989)
	Linguistic context	A mono- vs. bilingual community (the context considered from a sociolinguistic perspective).	The learner is more likely to produce instances of lexical transfer if the interlocutor is also familiar with the target and source languages.	Odlin (1989) Grosjean (2001) Dewaele (1998, 2001)
<i>Cognitive, attentional, and developmental factors</i>	Level of cognitive maturity	The person's level of cognitive and conceptual maturity at the time of language acquisition and use.	The effects of cognitive maturity relate to the constraints that conceptualization has on language production/comprehension; those constraints result in similarities in a person's L1 and L2 production/comprehension, and in different patterns of transfer in individuals who are at different levels of cognitive development. Cognitive maturity and transfer also interact with L2 proficiency.	Jarvis (1998) Cenoz (2002)
	Developmental and universal processes of language acquisition	The natural and universal principles of cognitive and linguistic development that govern how a person processes and stores new knowledge about language.	Simplification and overgeneralization seem to be two acquisitional universals, although learners with different L1 backgrounds differ in frequency.	Jarvis & Odlin (2000)
	Cognitive language learning abilities	The cognitive abilities that allow individuals to acquire a language.	Those people who are specially skilled at acquiring the target language features are expected to rely less on their knowledge of other languages	Major (1992)

	Attention to and awareness of language	The explicit knowledge of language and conscious control of language use.	The learning of additional languages beyond the L1 leads to increased levels of metalinguistic awareness and this in turn accelerates the acquisition of subsequent languages.	Odlin (1989) Jessner (2006)
<i>Factors related to cumulative language experience and knowledge</i>	Age	The aging, age of acquisition, age of task, etc.	Age effects may differ from one language level to another because of the moderating influence of educational and social variables, which have varying levels of impact on different areas of language use.	Flege (1981) Jarvis (1998) Cenoz (2001)
	Length, frequency, and intensity of language exposure	The characteristics of the language instruction received and other types of exposure to the L2.	The relationship between amount of L2 instruction and transfer is curvilinear, initially increasing to a certain point and the decreasing.	Jarvis (2000) Cenoz (2001) Sjöholm (1995)
	Length of residence	The time L2 users have been living in an L2 environment.	This factor is highly confounded with age of arrival and amount of use of the L1 in the L2 environment, but transfer tends to decrease as length of residence in the L2 environment becomes longer.	Guion et al. (2000) Hammarberg (2001)
	General level of proficiency	The speaker's proficiency in both the source and the recipient languages.	Apparently, language transfer is more likely to occur at lower levels of proficiency since learners often draw on their L1 to fill a lexical or syntactic gap when they lack the linguistic means of expression in the L2. Proficiency can cause L1 influence to decrease, increase, remain constant, decrease nonlinearly, increase nonlinearly, or remain continually fluctuating.	Kellerman (1983) Odlin (1989) Jarvis (2000)
	Number and order of acquired languages	The number and order of acquisition of the source languages.	According to the Last Language Effect (Shanon, 1991), the most recently acquired language is more available for transfer.	Hammarberg (2001) Dewaele (1998)
<i>Factors related to the learning environment</i>	Learning context and approach	The distinction between formal learning and naturalistic exposure and the degree to which the learner is focused into the formal properties of the language versus meaning and communication.	In formal learning situations, especially when attention is paid to form, students are expected to consciously avoid negative transfer.	Jessner (2006) Odlin (1989) Singleton (1990)
<i>Factors related to language use</i>	Idiolect	The individual idiosyncratic use of the L1.	The individual use of L1 can affect transfer choices.	Backus (2005)
	Level of formality	The context from a pragmatic perspective.	The speaker will tend to apply a higher level of control and attention during language production in a formal setting.	Dewaele (1998, 2001) Grosjean (2001)
	Interlocutor	The person the speaker is talking to.	Transfer is more likely to occur when the speaker and his or her interlocutor share the source language	Grosjean (1988)
	Task type	The kind of linguistic performance (production, comprehension, interaction).	In those tasks where higher attentional requirements are necessary, fewer attentional resources are available for monitoring linguistic production and, thus, a higher amount of transfer is expected.	Poullisse (1990)

An in-depth exploration of all these factors is certainly beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, in the following subsections I will devote some paragraphs to those we consider the most relevant variables for our study proposal, i.e. prototypicality, cross-linguistic similarity, and language level. I will present each variable first as it applies to CLI in general, and then in section 1.4.1. as to L2 to L3 transfer, during third language acquisition. We should not forget, however, that none of them constitutes an absolute factor, as CLI seems to be an individual-based phenomenon depending on a wide range of interdependent variables whose relative weights researchers have not yet truly clarified.

### **1.3.1. Markedness and prototypicality**

In linguistic terms, marked features are seen ‘special’ in relation to the more ‘basic’ unmarked ones. From a typological point of view, an area X is to be considered relatively more marked than some other area Y, if cross-linguistically X implies the presence of Y, but Y does not imply the presence of X. According to Ellis (2001:320), two hypotheses regarding the effects of markedness on transferability of L1 features have been investigated: (1) learners will transfer unmarked forms when the corresponding target language form is marked, and (2) learners will resist transferring marked forms, especially when the corresponding target language form is unmarked.

‘Unmarked categories from the native language are substituted for the corresponding marked categories in the target language... Marked structures are seldom transferred, and if they are transferred, they are much more easily eradicated from the target language’. (Hyltenstam, 1984:43)

However, not all researchers take the view that learners will resist transferring marked L1 forms. For example, according to Zolb (1984), learners’ resistance to the transfer of marked forms when the corresponding structure is unmarked in the target language can be overcome if learners obtain evidence that such transfer is positive.

It is not still clear how markedness interacts with other variables. However, there is ample evidence that transfer of both marked and unmarked syntactic structures is quite common (Liceras, 1985). Eckman’s Markedness Differential Hypothesis (1977) establishes that the areas of difficulty that a L2 learners will have can be predicted by comparing the native language (NL) and the target language (TL) as:

- ‘(a) those areas of the TL that are different from the NL and are relatively more marked than in the NL will be difficult;
- (b) the degree of difficulty associated with those aspects of the TL that are different and more marked than in the NL corresponds to the relative degree of markedness associated with those aspects;



(c) those areas of the TL that are different from the NL but are not relatively more marked than the NL will not be difficult.' (1977:321)

The vagueness of the concept of *markedness*, which sometimes make difficult to determine which features are marked with relation to others (Eckman, 1985:306), led Kellerman to search for those features 'native speakers' perceived as 'infrequent, irregular, semantically or structurally opaque, or in any other way exceptional' (1983:117) in order to define the concept of *prototypicality*. *Prototypicality* relates to L1 users' perceptions concerning the degree to which a structure or meaning is prototypical (central, typical, universal) versus aprototypical (non-central, atypical, language-specific). The basic idea was that L2 learners see some L1 features as being universal (i.e., unmarked or prototypical) and therefore more transferable than others and that perceptions regarding transferability are not influenced by learners' experience with L2.

### **1.3.2. Cross-linguistic similarity**

Language distance can be regarded as linguistic, meaning the actual degree of difference between the languages, or as psycholinguistic, meaning the learners' assumption of the degree of difference (Ellis, 2001:327). The learner's perception of the distance between L1 and L2, which Kellerman (1978) refers to as *psychotypology*, appears to be a major factor in determining the likelihood of language transfer.

Learners form 'projections' about what can be transferred on the basis of their beliefs as to whether the native and the target languages are the 'same' –either in terms of 'linguistic detail' or 'in very general terms'; on the basis of these projections, learning decisions, or 'conversions' are made. Corder (1983) states that the learner's psychotypology determines his or her willingness to borrow from the L1. This factor, together with the markedness of the L1, would constraint language transfer. Nevertheless, L1 items are not perceived as inherently 'neutral' (and so available for transfer) or 'specific' (and so not available for transfer). L2 users often incorrectly perceive the actual degree of congruence between languages. Indeed, experience affects the learner's perception of cross-linguistic distance (Kellerman, 1978:40). Therefore, whereas prototypicality establishes what learners are prepared to risk transferring, psychotypology determines what is actually transferred in performance. In Odlin's (1989:142) words, 'an *objective* estimation of language distance can sometimes be misleading about the likelihood of transfer: in some cases, the *subjective* estimation of distance by learners can override an objective measure'. That means that learners decide whether to transfer or not those features they perceive to be prototypical on the basis of the perceived distance between

L1 and L2. The interaction between psychotypology and prototypicality is an extremely complex process, particularly because learners' psychotypologies vary with proficiency in L2.

Two types of *subjective similarities*, i.e. those similarities the L2 user believes or perceives to exist between the languages, are frequently distinguished (Jarvis, 1998; Ringbom, 2007): (1) a *perceived similarity* is a conscious or unconscious judgement that a form, structure, meaning, function or pattern that an L2 user has encountered in the input of the recipient language is similar to a corresponding feature of the source language, whereas (2) an *assumed similarity* is a conscious or unconscious hypothesis that a form, structure, meaning, function, or pattern that exist in the source language has a counterpart in the recipient language, regardless of whether the L2 user has yet encountered anything like it in the input of the recipient language, and regardless of whether it actually does exist in the recipient language. Whereas many cases of semantic and pragmatic transfer respond to the first type, most cases involving transfer of formal properties seem to occur on the basis of assumed similarities (Ringbom, 1987, 2001).

On Wode's opinion (1983), so that language transfer can occur, the languages involved must be similar in a given area. Odlin (1989) maintains that language distance is a major determinant of the amount of time learners need to become highly proficient in a language, provided that learners generally find it easier to learn a second language similar to their first one. Indeed, where the mother tongue is formally similar to the target language, the learner will pass more rapidly along the developmental continuum (or some parts of it) than where it differs (Corder, 1981:101). According to Corder, not only the learner's first language, but all other previously learned languages have a facilitating effect, as we will see in section 1.4. Ringbom's (2007) findings suggest that learners' perception of the overall degree of similarity between languages may have an even more profound effect on certain types of transfer than does their perception of the specific, discrete similarities across languages. This particularly happens in the case of negative transfer involving forms, structures, and patterns, which is more frequent when assumed specific similarities are motivated by a perception of overall similarity between languages. Negative transfer in this case involves assumed specific similarities that are at odds with objective specific differences.

Psychotypology can represent a danger: when the L1-L2 associations that learners form are not true equivalents, this can impede the acquisition of the L2 structure (Eckman, 2004:517). In addition to this, we shall note that in foreign-language learning situations where learners have little contact with the L2 outside the classroom, there is a great gap between

comprehension and production. In these cases, ‘learners can comprehend a great deal more than they have yet the chance to learn (or even be exposed to) in the L2, whereas their L2 production is more limited to just those things that they have so far learned through experience and/or instruction in the L2’ (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008:177).

### **1.3.3. Language level: CLI on tense-system acquisition**

Although the areas of language do not exert direct influence on CLI *per se*, transfer appears more frequently and noticeably at the levels of phonology, lexis and discourse than grammar. In a classroom environment, learners are often exposed to grammatical rules and it seems that grammar is the area of language learning which is given the most attention. Learners’ more developed metalinguistic awareness of grammar could be one of the main reasons why CLI does not seem to be as frequent at grammatical level. *Language level* (Ellis, 1994:316) can be used, therefore, to predict the likelihood of transfer (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008:183). However, factors such as the degree of CLI similarity and the L2 proficiency have been found to complicate the occurrence of transfer in all language levels (Ellis, 1994:316; Jarvis, 2000:246; Odlin, 1989:23).

According to Gass (1984:abstract), in addition to generalizations and approximations of target language structures, there are two major interacting variables that shape the progress of the development of the syntax of a L2: language transfer and language universals. In her opinion, there are four factors that act as input filters, determining what aspect of the target language are noticed by a learner (Gass & Selinker, 2001:402): frequency -features that are frequent in the input are most likely to be noticed-, affect -a category including such variables as social distance, status, motivation, and attitude-, attention, and prior knowledge. The learning process involves the integration of the new knowledge with the previous one. Prior knowledge is one of the factors determining whether the meaningfulness of input and it includes both knowledge of the native and other languages, existing knowledge of the language being learned, world knowledge, and language universals.

Chomsky (1975:29) defined the Universal Grammar (UG) as ‘the system of principles, conditions and, rules that are elements or properties of all human languages’. There are two broad views on the role of language universals, i.e. the components of UG, in L2 acquisition. The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vroman, 1989; Schachter, 1988) argues that adult L2 acquisition differs from child language acquisition, as the first do not have access to the UG: their access to it is mediated, instead, by the L1. The Access to UG Hypothesis, on

the other hand, argues that the innate language facility is alive and well in L2 acquisition and constraints the grammars of L2 learners in much the same way as it constraints those of child L1 learners. However, there are a number of different positions with this theory. For a review of the positions regarding the availability of UG and the relation between the two variables, access and transfer, see White (2000:130-155).

The use of tenses is one of the most troublesome aspects FL students have to cope with, since they have to learn a completely new set of correspondences between time and tense/aspect. A large body of studies explores the relationship between verb semantics and the development of tense-aspect morphology. Some researchers have claimed that the developmental sequence of tense-aspect morphology in L1 and L2 acquisition follows a universal pattern and it is strongly influenced by the inherent semantic aspect of the verbs to which the inflections are attached (Shirai & Andersen, 1995; Weist, 2002 in L1; Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995; Andersen, 1991 in L2). This tendency has been referred to as the Aspect Hypothesis (see section 2.1.1. for more detail), and have received wide support from empirical research (Odlin, 2005:13). Some recent studies, however, have uncovered some discrepancies with the proposed tenets of the Aspect Hypothesis (Housen, 2002; Rohde, 2002; Duff & Li, 2002). For instance, Rocca (2002:96) considers that 'the form-function relations in the L1 tense-aspect system constrain the learners' acquisition of the L2 tense-aspect system'. In order to solve this dilemma, Salaberry & Shirai (2002) pointed out that the simple form-meaning correlation is only one part of the picture which is conditioned by various factors: L1 transfer, input data and its processing, formation of prototypes, discourse functions, instructional variables, and cognitive or universal constraints.

Researchers on the field of CLI on tense-system acquisition, mainly centred on English as L2, have focused on two different aspects (Celaya, 1990:160): firstly, the acquisition of tenses from the point of view of form; and secondly, the acquisition of tense meaning on L2. As the study proposal presented on chapter 3 deals with tense and aspect markers use, I will shortly review now the most outstanding findings in the area.

On the first place, studies reveal that, in order to understand the acquisition of tense meaning, the analysis of the ways the languages involved express time reference is essential. As I have already suggested, languages express the concept of time in different ways and, therefore the same time in different languages may include a different span of time, i.e. the same time may have different functions in two different languages. I will discuss this issue in

section 2.1. Afterwards, I will offer some considerations about the acquisition of tense and aspect markers in L2 learning situations (section 2.1.1.).

Secondly, in many cases it becomes essential to study the form of the verb before focusing on its meaning as L2 students frequently select tenses due to morphological similarities, without taking into account the meaning the selected form reflects (Harley & Swain, 1984) or make errors in form with no influence in the choice of tenses as a result of overgeneralization of previously acquired forms (Taylor, 1975; Chamot, 1979). In section 2.1.2., I will focus on the different approaches to the study of the relationship between form and meaning of tenses.

#### **1.4. Language transfer from L2 to L3**

As I have already mentioned in section 1.1., within the learning process of a new foreign language, CLI involves not only the learner's L1 but any previous linguistic knowledge the student might have. I will devote this section to the review of some aspects concerning language transfer from non-native languages previously learned in FLA.

Although generally no distinction is made between a L2 and additional languages, according to Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner (2001) researchers such Odlin & Jarvis (2004), Odlin, Alonso Alonso & Alonso-Vázquez (2004), etc. have become more and more interested in L3 acquisition and in the influence additional languages have on the acquisition of a new language (what we have defined in section 1.1. as *lateral transfer*). Indeed, recent psycholinguistic research on third language acquisition confirms that the acquisition of an L3 shares many characteristics with the acquisition of an L2 but it also presents differences (Cenoz & Jessner, 2000: ix). Besides the individual and social factors affecting FLA, which we have considered in section 1.3., we should take into account the effects of the process and the product of FLA on third language acquisition, which made the later a more complex phenomenon.

*Multilingual acquisition* (MLA) can be defined as 'the process of acquiring more than two languages' (Cenoz, 2000:29). It thus comprises the consecutive and simultaneous acquisition of three or more languages. MLA is often considered as a simply variation on second language acquisition (Sharwood Smith, 1994:7), but it presents a greater complexity due to 'the effects associated with the interactions that are possible among multiple languages being learned and the processes of learning them' (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998:16). The order

and context of acquisition of the languages involved in MLA cases, determine a number of different situations. Linguistic typology, socio-cultural status, ethnolinguistic vitality are other variables that can potentially influence MLA. Besides, the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in MLA appear to be more complex (Clyne, 1997:113) and justify the need to conduct specific research in order to determine its characteristics and the specific operations that affect the process.

To sum up, research in the area of cross-linguistic influence in MLA is still in a preliminary stage (Cenoz, 2000:49) and there is still no clear understanding of the importance each factor has in the acquisition process. For instance, Cenoz (2001) and Clyne (1997) support the idea of typological closeness as the major factor influencing transfer from previously acquired languages; Ringbom (1987), however, considers this factor a source of danger as learners are misled in cases where languages differ. Anyway, there is no doubt that the L1 cannot be any longer considered as the sole source of CLI in L3 acquisition. Indeed, as Williams & Hammarberg (1998:323) state ‘provided the factors of proficiency, typology, and recency are at a sufficient level, L2s appear more likely to be activated than the L1 as supplier language during the early stages of L3 acquisition’. In section 1.4.1., we will see which are the variables determining the occurrence of transfer from a language other than the L1. Then, in section 1.4.2., I will focus on the role of CLI on the acquisition of tense and aspect in a L3.

#### **1.4.1. Trigger factors of multilingual transfer**

In section 1.3., I have briefly reviewed the variables affecting the occurrence and extend of CLI in general. During MLA some of them seem to particularly promote the use of L2 items in an L3 utterance: cognitive mode (Dewaele, 1998, 2001; Grosjean, 1995, 2001), language typology (Cenoz, 2001; Ringbom, 2001), proficiency (De Angelis & Selinker, 2001; Hammarberg, 2001), and frequency of use (Hammarberg, 2001; Mägiste, 1984) become trigger factors for transfer from the L2 to the L3. In this section I will provide a general overview of the variables affecting L2 to L3 transfer in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomena concerned in our study proposal.

Three variables monopolized our attention in subsections 1.3.1. to 1.3.3., namely prototypicality, cross-linguistic similarity, and language level. The correlation between language typology and CLI during L3 acquisition is basically the same as described above: according to researchers (Cenoz, 2001; De Angelis & Selinker, 2001; Ecke, 2001; Fuller, 1999; Hammarberg, 2001; Ringbom, 2001; Williams & Hammarberg, 1998), typological

closeness between L2 and L3 facilitates language transfer. Ringbom (1986) finds that typology overrides other factors such as frequency of use and amount of exposure. In addition to this, the subjects' awareness of typology has a direct effect on the extent of their language transfer (Cenoz, 2001). Thus, as far as cross-linguistic similarity is concerned, it is important not only to concentrate on the learner's L1 but to consider any additional languages the learner may have acquired, without forgetting that learners may be more likely to borrow from a language they actively use than other languages they know but do not use (Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner, 2001). Bearing in mind that proficiency and psychotypology influence the choice of source language, it is often the most recently acquired language from which borrowing occurs. Indeed, Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner (2001) regard recency as an important factor and state that an L2 is activated more easily if the speaker has used it recently and thus maintained easy access to it. Pavlenko (2008:183) indicates that the lack of studies documenting lateral transfer in language subsystems other than lexis does not allow us to reach definitive conclusions regarding the correlations between multilingual transfer and language level.

I have mentioned proficiency as one of the variables interacting with cross-linguistic similarity. However, this factor must be considered from a double perspective. On the first place, we should take into account proficiency in the target language. From this point of view, the general consensus in MLT is that much L2 to L3 transfer is the result of low L3 proficiency (Dewaele, 2001; Fuller, 1999; Hammarberg, 2001; Williams & Hammarberg, 1998). And, on the second place, we have to consider the role of the proficiency in the source language, or the *base language* (Chandrasekhar, 1978): in order for the L2 to provide material for transfer, the speaker must have a certain degree of L2 competence (Hammarberg, 2001); on the contrary, Shanon (1991) points out that often the most recently acquired, and therefore the weakest, language is the source of language transfer, but it is, however, apparent that if the learner has previously acquired a language more related to the target language than the weakest language, this related language is more likely to be the source of transfer than the most recently acquired one.

As I have seen in section 1.3.3., CLI appears in all the language levels. As far as grammar is concerned, we have seen that the study of transfer in the areas of aspect and tense marking have received much attention from the researches in FLA. In section 1.4.2., I shall present the most relevant aspects in the domain of transfer from the L2 to the L3 concerning tense and aspect.

### **1.4.2. L2 to L3 transfer of tense and aspect**

According to Salaberry (2005), the transfer of knowledge about aspectual values in languages that have relatively no major semantic differences in tense-aspectual contrasts is a relatively unexplored topic. He concentrates his attention on the transfer of knowledge of perfective-imperfective contrasts in past tense verbal morphology from a non-native Romance language to another non-native Romance language, i.e. L2 to L3 transfer of conceptual semantic notions about aspectual distinctions.

Salaberry's study focuses on English-Spanish bilingual adults learning Portuguese as a L3 in a classroom setting. His data seem to prove that learners transfer their knowledge of aspectual contrast represented in their L2 knowledge of Spanish, even if most of them have trouble with the selection of the appropriate inflectional markers with stative verbs. Accordingly, L1 speakers of a Romance language would have little trouble transferring their knowledge of perfective/imperfective contrasts in past tense verbal morphology from the native language to another Romance language. Here, the perceived similarity between the languages involved is claimed to play a crucial role.

As far as the preterite/perfect opposition is concerned, I have not found any study providing evidence of transfer from the L2 to the L3. Some studies offer, instead, empirical data supporting (negative) transfer from the L1 to L2 English, as we will see in section 3.1.

### **1.5. Concluding summary**

Evidently, cross-linguistic influence plays a major role in foreign language acquisition. However, the effects of prior linguistic knowledge are not limited to the transfer from the native language, as any additional language the learner might have previously acquired, as well as the process of acquiring them, are likely to influence to some extent the acquisition of any new languages.

The notion of cross-linguistic influence was first proposed during the post-war years and has ever since been of interest to second language researchers. Nevertheless, the concept itself has undergone several changes across the years, according to the approaches dominating the fields of second language research at any moment. Under the hegemony of behaviourism, transfer from the L1 became a key factor in FLA, as L2 performance was thought to reflect the operation of L1 habits so that learning an L2 consisted essentially in overcoming the effects of L1 habits that produced negative transfer. The behaviourist view, that learning was



highly influenced by interference of prior knowledge and took place inductively through analogy rather than analysis, dominated the two decades following the Second World War. Due to pedagogic needs, Contrastive Analysis was developed to enable the identifying of the problem areas. In the early 1970's the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis finally lost ground due to the findings of such researchers as Burt & Dulay, who argued that there was a unique order of acquisition for L2 learners, independently of their L1. The role of transfer was then minimized.

Nowadays, researchers agree, however, that cross-linguistic influence is one of the factors affecting FLA and the interest is now focused in establishing the conditions in which transfer occurs, i.e. the variables determining the extent and type of language transfer. Some of these factors depend on the characteristics of the languages involved; others have to do with the conditions in which the language is learned and used; finally, the inner characteristics of the learner seem to play an important role.

Language transfer occurs at all linguistic levels and is more likely to happen in when the learner perceives the features as similar in both the source and the target language. However, we should remember that the learner's perception of closeness does not always convey with real linguistic similarity.

In the field of tense and aspect marking, research have proved the occurrence of transfer of knowledge of perfective/imperfective contrasts in past tense verbal morphology from one Romance language to another Romance language, both in the case of L1 to L2 and L2 to L3. In chapter 3 I will present a proposal for the study of L2 to L3 transfer of preterite/perfect contrasts.

## **2. The three languages: A brief analysis of past-time reference**

In the L2 acquisition of tense/aspect morphology, the grammatical development is part of a subsystem in the interlanguage (IL) grammar. As we have seen in section 1.2.2., tense-systems in IL are influenced by both L1 and L2 tense-systems. Therefore, the comparison between the three languages involved in our study proposal is essential before designing it. Stating the differences and the similarities between the three languages can help us to discover the areas in which L2 may influence L3 and to understand how the tense-system is organized in the IL of the student of English as L3 in the context we will consider in the study proposal presented in chapter 3. Consequently, the principal aim of this section is to present a general overview and discussion of the English, Spanish and Italian past-tense systems, illustrated with examples from the three languages, as well as trying to bring into relief the areas of contrast and similarity between the three languages regarding past tenses which will be referred to when designing the study proposal.

This section is organized as follows. Section 2.1. deals with temporality and the way languages express it; the main theories about the L2 acquisition of language means to express temporal meaning are review in subsection 2.1.1., whereas 2.1.2. sets a framework for the description of tense/aspect in any language. Sections 2.2., 2.3., and 2.4. give an overall picture of the past-tense systems in English, Spanish and Italian, and concentrate on the time reference of the pair of tenses simple past / compound past when used as absolute tenses, which is as they will be treated in chapter 3; and, finally, section 2.5. offers some preliminary conclusions on the comparison between these tenses in the three languages as far as time reference is concerned. It should be notice, however, that the purpose of the section is not so much to predict areas of difficulty as to provide information which will be referred to when analysing the use of L3 English past-tenses though the study proposal in chapter 3.

### **2.1. Time, tense and aspect**

The meanings and forms of tenses are usually difficult for non-native speakers to acquire. It is argued that tense/aspect marking is one of the most difficult grammatical ideas to grasp in foreign language learning (Hinkel, 1992:557). A great number of FLA researchers suppose that learners' L1 conceptualization of time and lexical or grammatical time markers have an impact on their acquisition of foreign language tense. That is because the perceptual, conceptual and cultural divisions of time, i.e. time attributes, differ among linguistic communities (Comrie, 1985:3). Tense is a linguistic category, and therefore, it is not found in

all languages (Lyons, 1968:304), whereas time is a universal non-linguistic category which varies from culture to culture. It is widely accepted, however, that the primary function of tenses is to signal time reference (Putz et al., 2001:63), but it is also true that there is not constant relationship between *tense* and *time*. Comrie (1976:5) concludes that, although both tense and aspect are concerned with time, they do it in a different way: whereas tense is a deictic category, i.e. locates situations in time, usually with reference to the present moment, through also with reference to other situations, aspect is not concerned with relating the time of the situation to any other time-point, but rather with the internal temporal constituency of the one situation, so that one could state the difference as one between situation-internal time (*aspect*) and situation-external time (*tense*). In same line, Lyons (1977) considers that what distinguishes aspect from tense is basically that the later is deictic (that is, the interpretation depends on the *here* and *now* of the discourse), whereas the former is non-deictic.

Klein's *conventional picture* (1994:15) explains the three different ways in which temporality shows up in language:

'first, the time of some event, action, process, etc. may be RELATED to some other time interval (temporal reference, in particular, tense); second, the temporal course of an event, action, process, etc. may be VIEWED or PRESENTED in different ways (aspect); third, expressions, notably verbs, may be classified according to their INHERENT TEMPORAL FEATURES'.

According to Klein (1994:36), temporal intervals as such have no qualitative properties, but duration and being before, after, or within other temporal intervals. Properties are assigned to them, either explicitly, by the lexical content of verbs or other expressions associated with them, or implicitly, i.e., by all sorts of contextual information or word knowledge.

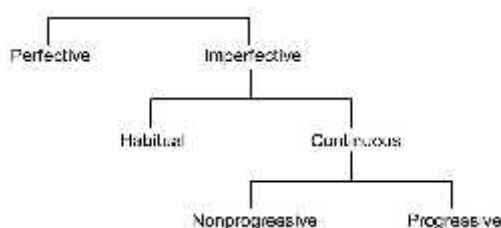
'Although a situation that is partly described by the lexical content of an utterance has a time – the time of situation TSit- it is not TSit which is directly linked to the time of utterance TU. There is an intervening link –the time for which the particular utterance makes an assertion. It is this time span, topic time TT, which is linked to TU, on one hand, and to TSit, on the other. It is via TT that the lexical content of an utterance is embedded in time. What TSit in a give utterance is, is only indirectly derivable to a lesser or greater degree of certainty –from the topic time, the nature of the lexical content, from the way in which lexical content and topic time are brought together, and finally from adverbials which can be used to enrich the lexical content.' (Klein, 1994:37)

*Temporal reference* relates the time of an event, process, etc. to some distinguished time span, which generally is the time of utterance. Thus, we say that some event temporally precedes the time of utterance (i.e. is in the past), or that it follows the time of utterance (future), or that it overlaps the time of utterance (present). Two basic kinds of linguistic devices allow the speaker to express temporal reference: on the first place, *tense*, which is a systematic grammatical marking and it is typically deictic; on the second place, adverbials.

According to Lyons (1977:678), ‘tense grammaticalizes the relationship which holds between time of the situation that is being described and the temporal zero-point of the deictic context’, i.e. the time of utterance. Although tense has been traditionally viewed as a category of the verb because it is realized through a morphological attachment to the verb in most languages, Lyons considers that, from a semantic point of view, tense is a category of the sentence. That is because, as far as meaning is concerned, the choice of a given tense affects the meaning of the whole sentence. In Young’s words (1980:190), ‘tense makes the proposition compatible with reference to certain periods of time’.

As summarized by Olsen (1997:3), *aspect* refers to two related phenomena: the ability of verbs and other lexical items to describe how a situation develops or holds in time (*lexical aspect* or *situation type*), and the view some verbal auxiliaries and affixes present of the development or result of a situation at a given time (*grammatical aspect* or *viewpoint type*). According to Smith (1991), a situation is located in a time interval with a given viewpoint superimposed on it, and in this manner aspect is composed by these two parameters. Lexical aspect is part of the inherent semantics of the predicate, whereas grammatical aspect is conveyed morphologically (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000).

*Grammatical aspect* (GA) concerns the different perspectives a speaker can take and express with regard to the temporal course of the event, action, process, etc. Hence, the speaker can view it as completed, as on-going, as imminent, and possibly in other ways. Anyway, this ‘view’ is independent of the position the event, action, process, etc. occupies on the time axis. The most relevant ways GA is expressed in are verb morphology, adverbials and specific particles. The basic aspectual opposition within GA is that of perfectivity and imperfectivity. As defined in Comrie (1976), *perfective aspect* allows us to view an event as a completed whole (bounded or external perspective), whereas *imperfective aspect* constrains us to focus on the internal stages of an ongoing situation (unbounded or internal perspective). Many languages have a single category to express imperfectivity, and in some of them imperfectivity may be subdivided into a number of distinct categories. Comrie (1976:25) represents as follows the most typical divisions within the set of aspectual values:



*Habituality* refers to situations which are characteristic of an extended period of time, so extended that the situation is viewed as a characteristic feature of a whole period. Habituality can in principle be combined with any other semantic aspectual values appropriate to situations that can be protracted in time or iterated (Comrie, 1976:26-32). *Continuousness* can be defined negatively as imperfectivity that is not habituality (Comrie 1976:26). And *progressiveness* is defined by Comrie (1976:32-40) as the combination of progressive meaning (referring to a situation in progress, but not habitual) with non-stative meaning. Since languages have different criteria for classifying predicates as stative or not, they may have different rules for determining when explicitly progressive forms can be used. In addition to this, languages may or may not grammaticalize all the available conceptual categories. Besides the main opposition between perfective and imperfective aspect, Comrie (1976:52) distinguishes another category which does not directly give information about the internal temporal situation of the event, action, process, etc. itself but rather express that the situation is relevant to two time-points, such as indicating the present relevance of a past situation: the *perfect aspect*. This makes perfect very close to a tense when compared to other aspects (Huddleston, 1984:164). Nevertheless, it is still classified as an aspect.

Verbs differ in the temporal characteristics of their lexical contents, which include durativity, inchoativity, iterativity, stativity, etc. Such inherent verbal features are frequently referred as *aktionsart* (Agrell, 1908) or *lexical aspect* (LA), and allow us to group verbs into different classes whose members denote different *situation types* (Vendler, 1957). In fact, according to Smith (1991), *situation type* indirectly classifies the action or state the verb talks about according to three temporal properties: dynamism, telicity and durativity. The distinction between durative and punctual aspect relates to whether the event described by the verb is over almost as soon as it has begun, in which case is *punctual*, or extends over time, in which case is *durative*. *Telicity* describes resultativity in the internal temporal contour of an event (Van Hout, 2000:241). It refers to the semantic inherent endpoint of an event denoted by a verbal predicate or sentence. Telicity of a verbal predicate (VP) or sentence is determined by the lexical semantics of the verb, its arguments (both obligatory and optional), adjuncts, the discourse-level linguistic context, the extra linguistic context of the utterance and general world knowledge associated with the meaning of sentences (Filip, 1999:122). A situation is *telic* if it has a natural completion or endpoint arising from the meaning of the VP; if not, it is *atelic*. Finally, a verb is *stative* if it describes an event that remains constant through time and, crucially, does not involve internal change or action. In contrast, a *dynamic* verb involves internal change.

According to these features, Smith (1991:7) distinguished situations into five prototypes, including state, activity, accomplishment, achievement, and semelfactive. The classification is based on Vendler's (1957) with one addition, the semelfactive.

Aspectual Class	Telic	Dynamic	Durative	Examples
State			+	know, have
Activity		+	+	march, paint
Accomplishment	+	+	+	destroy
Achievement	+	+		notice, win
Semelfactive		+		jump, tap

Olsen (1997:153) demonstrated that the features used to evaluate lexical aspect are semantically privative (+ / unmarked), as shown in the table above, rather than equipollent (+ / -), as in the systems of Flanning (1990). Features of verbs that are marked in this privative opposition do not 'shift'—their marked meaning (whether of grammatical or lexical aspect) remains unchanged by contextual factors. Unspecified features, however, may be modified pragmatically by other constituents ('implicature'). According to Smith (1997:206), 'they may be interpreted as either lacking the relevant feature (i.e. as atelic, stative or punctual), or, in the appropriate pragmatic context, as similar to their marked counterparts (i.e. telic, dynamic or durative). The marked features, therefore, fall into the area of semantics, whereas unmarked ones are classed with pragmatics. That means that [+telic] verbs, for instance, specify an inherent bound, whereas [0telic] verbs generally lack a bound, although they may acquire telicity in the appropriate sentential or discourse context. The lexical aspect value is determined, therefore, by both the verb and its arguments, which Smith (1997:53) called the *verb constellation*.

Aspectual meaning is determined, then, as a function of the combinatorial properties of situation type (achievement, accomplishment, activity, state, and semelfactive) and viewpoint aspect (perfective, imperfective, and neutral). However, there are combinatorial constraints of compatibility between certain GL and certain LA (Comrie, 1976:66-78). In Lyons' (1977:713) words, there are 'severe restrictions upon the combination of certain aspects with verbs having a certain aspectual character'. Comrie (1976) discussed this kind of lexical-grammatical relationships with the 'naturalness of combination principle', which states that some aspect morphemes combine naturally with some verb types but not others: for example, perfective aspect combines naturally with punctual verbs but not stative verbs.

Just as tense, aspect should be analyzed within discourse since it may be marked by forms other than the verb. In fact, in a number of languages tenses and aspects are characteristic not only of verbs but also of nominal, adjectival and other lexical categories

(Binnick, 1991; Majewicz, 1985). The observation that in many languages aspect is not marked by, or on, the verbal form but elsewhere has led Majewicz (1985) to consider aspect as a predicative category rather than a category of the verb. Alternatively, some researchers view aspect as predominantly a sentential category: ‘although aspect, tense and mood are usually indicated in the verbal morphology, they do not so much characterize the verb itself as the whole of the sentence, including subjects and objects’ (Comrie, 1976:45). Hopper (1982:16) contends that verbal aspect cannot be successfully defined based on the sentence as its unit of analysis, but that a broader context, i.e. the discourse-text, has to be considered.

To sum up, both tense and aspect codify temporal relations, but they differ with respect to the time spans between which these relations obtain: time of utterance and topic time in the case of tense, and topic time and time of situation in the case of aspect (Klein, 1994:59). Aspectual meaning results from the interaction of aspectual viewpoint and situation type. Aspect is more widespread throughout languages than tense; indeed, many languages do not have tense but very few do not have aspect (Turell, 1983). Languages that have morphological means of expressing an aspectual opposition often have a clearly identifiable marker of aspect (or of one member or an aspectual opposition), the forms of the verb being otherwise the same for both aspects. Although, in general, aspects and tenses cross-classify, aspect and tense do sometimes impinge on one another. In fact, in many languages both tense and aspect are combined in a single verbal form, which is referred to as *tense*. The tenses I will analyze in sections 2.2., 2.3., and 2.4. are called *tenses* although, as we shall see, one of them (the present perfect) involves both tense and aspect. Nevertheless, the decision of not making any further specification was made for the following reasons: on the first place, in descriptions of tense-systems, those tenses are referred to as tenses, even if one of them includes aspectual notions; secondly, the subject of study in this chapter is not the difference between tense and aspect in English, Spanish and Italian, but rather the expression of time reference by means of tenses by L3 English learners; and finally, since the expression of aspect differs in the three languages, referring to all the tense form as *tenses* may avoid possible misunderstandings.

In order to shed light on the discussion of the possible CLI in the use of certain English tenses by L3 learners, a brief account of the past-tense systems of the languages involved will be given in sections 2.2., 2.3., and 2.4. In practice, I will limit myself to tenses those expressing perfective and perfect aspect in the past. A terminological qualification is in order here. The grammatical forms I am going to consider are named differently in the

different grammatical traditions. Thus, in order to have a unified terminology, I shall speak in most cases of *simple past* and *compound past* (henceforth SP and CP), meaning the following pairs of tenses: English *simple past* and *present perfect*, Spanish *pretérito indefinido* and *pretérito perfecto*, and Italian *passato remoto* and *passato prossimo*.

### **2.1.1. The acquisition of tense and aspect in L2**

The analysis of the acquisition of tense and aspect has become a central topic of research in the fields of FLA over the past few years (Andersen, 1991; Shirai & Andersen, 1994, 1996; Bardovi-Harling, 1994, 2000; Dietrich et al., 1995; Salaberry, 1998, 1999, 2000). Scholars' interest has moved on from mere descriptions of the linguistic structure of learner varieties towards a more general concern for the dynamics of the structures development and the factors determining the restructuring.

As I have suggested in section 2.1., the acquisition of a new tense-system implies the setting of a number of new form-meaning relationships in the L2. Any language presents a full array of devices (adverbial, verbal or grammatical) to express the aspectual and temporal properties of a situation, i.e. broadly speaking, to comment on its distribution over time (continuous, iterative, habitual, etc.) and to situate its overall time of occurrence. Therefore, the L2 learner needs to become aware of the temporal references and distinctions associated with each tense as well as the various conventions regarding the choice of either form, which may not be related to temporal meaning, but rather personal perspectives or discourse conventions.

Research on the acquisition of morphosyntactic tense and aspect marking offer two controversial hypotheses regarding the functional distribution of emergent tense-aspect morphology (Starren, 2001:78): (a) the Aspect Hypothesis (AH), to which the emergence of tense and aspect morphology is determined by the inherent lexical properties of the verb (lexical aspect or Aktionsart), and (b) the Discourse Hypothesis (DH), according to which the distribution of emergent tense-aspect morphology is determined by narrative structure.

The Aspect Hypothesis, that I have already mentioned in section 1.3.3., was initially formulated as a defective tense hypothesis based on evidence obtained from English native speakers learning Spanish: 'in beginning stages of languages acquisition only the *inherent aspectual* distinctions are encoded by verbal morphology, not tense or grammatical aspect'.(Andersen, 1991:307), i.e., verbal inflections in the learner's IL correlate more



strongly with inherent lexical aspect rather than grammatical aspect or tense. This strong version of the AH is totally intertwined with the idea that learners mark viewpoint aspect (e.g. imperfectivity, perfectivity, progressivity) before they mark tense (e.g. past, present and future), that is, in fact, a ‘grammatical aspect before grammatical tense hypothesis’. The other version of the AH, the so-called Lexical Aspect Hypothesis (LAH), claims that learners first will use the tense and viewpoint aspect morphology of the target language to redundantly mark inherent aspectual distinctions. The LAH is associated with four predictions concerning form-meaning association (Shirai & Andersen, 1996): (1) learners first use (perfective) past marking on achievements and accomplishments (events), eventually extend to activities and states; (2) in languages that encode the perfective/imperfective (e.g. Slavic languages) distinction morphologically, imperfective past appears later than perfective past, and imperfect past marking begins with states and activities, then extends to accomplishments (telic events) and finally to achievements (punctual events); (3) in languages that have progressive aspect, progressive marking begins with activities, and then extends to accomplishments and achievements; and (4) progressive marking is not incorrectly overextended to states. A thorough overview of the support to the AH both the first and second language acquisition is available in Bardovi-Harling (2000).

According to the Discourse Hypothesis, ‘learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground from background in narratives’ (Bardovi-Harling, 1994:43). Some scholars (Givón, 1984; Hopper & Thompson, 1984) have tried to relate both the AH and the DH: telic predicates tend to be in the foreground, where perfective forms occur frequently, whereas imperfective forms tend to be more common in the background, the realm of atelic predicates. In the Prototype Theory (Shirai & Andersen, 1994, 1996), telicity, perfectivity and foreground, on the one hand, and atelicity, imperfectivity, and background, on the other, can be considered two bundles of prototypical features, whereas the combination of features from one and the other would be considered non-prototypical. In this view, the acquisitional sequences hypothesized by the AH and DH are explained by resorting to the notion of prototypicality and a series of cognitive principles that are ultimately explained by discursive motivations (Shirai & Andersen, 1994).

Nevertheless, we should notice that both the LAH and the DH were developed from data collected in the natural setting and, therefore, ‘it is not clear why classroom learners would follow the same developmental sequences of natural learners given (1) that the sequential development of aspect among the latter is determined by natural discourse

(contextualized), and (2) that classroom discourse does not incorporate the features normally attributed to non-academic discourse' (Salaberry, 2000: 69). Considering the specific characteristics of FLA, Salaberry (2005:183) states that the L2 development of knowledge about tense-aspect contrast depends on three relevant factors.

On the first place, 'a linguistic factor predominantly specified by inherent lexical semantics of the verb phrase' (*ibid*). Apart from the LAH, Salaberry considers the Default Past Tense Hypothesis, which establishes that during the beginning stages of acquisition, L2 learners will try to convey past tense meaning by marking as many verbs as possible with some type of past tense marker irrespective of the lexical aspectual category of the verb, i.e. they will use a single marker of past tense across lexical aspectual classes (a default past tense marker).

On the second place, 'an environmental factor predicated on the quantity and quality of L2 input data the learner has access to during development (distributional biases in discourse, instructional factors such as teaching sequences)' (*ibid*). The Distributional Biases Hypothesis (Shirai & Andersen, 1994:96), explains the strong distributional bias of verb morphemes in early learner language as a reflexion of a similar but less absolute distributional bias of tense-aspect morphology in the input which language learners receive from competent speakers, such as native speakers or teachers.

And, on the third place, 'a cognitive factor brought about on-line processing demands e.g., the expression of tense is represented in the L1 and, as such, learner will attempt to explicitly mark it on verbal morphology'. That means that prior temporal and linguistic patterns are the source for transfer. Through the experiment proposed in chapter 3, however, I will try to prove that not only the L1 but also other previously acquired languages have a shaping role in the marking of verbal morphology.

According to Noyau (2002:112), in the acquisition of a L2, learners have to deal with two problems: a) the identification of forms (i.e. problems to do with segmentation or with amalgamated forms, allomorphs of grammatical elements and discontinuous morphemes); and, b) the forming of forms-functions linkage hypotheses. As acquisition process is, besides, largely determined by prior knowledge, particularly that linked to L1 experience, 'we can expect that, once the morphological variation of verbs in the L2 has been identified, the temporo-aspectual morphologization of the L2 will take more or less time to come to the learner according to the typological distance between the L1 and the L2, with the learner

seeking hypotheses in his/her linguistic experience via his/her L1'. (Noyau, *ibid*). Thus, the acquisition of temporal morphology can be better explained by an interpretation of the problem in terms of a competition model such as that proposed by Noyau (1998), who claims that L2 learners go through a period of systematic uncertainty in which there is a simultaneous competition different levels of analysis –pragmatic, semantical, and grammatical-of the target language.

### **2.1.2. The descriptive framework**

The study of temporality has been approached from two major methodological perspectives: firstly, from a form-only approach (Brown, 1973; Burt & Dulay, 1975); and secondly, from the 80's on also from a functional approach (Dietrich et al., 1995; von Stutterheim, 1986). Researchers working within the functional domain can be divided in two camps: those who conduct form-to-function (fo-to-fu) analyses and those who conduct \function-to-form (fu-to-fo) analyses or concept-oriented analyses (Klein & von Stutterheim, 1987). Researchers working within the fo-to-fu domain concentrate almost exclusively on the acquisition of tense and aspect inflection by first tracing a form (a morpheme on the verb) and then looking at its distribution in the learner data. On the other hand, researchers working on the fu-to-fo domain do focus on morphological tense and aspect inflection but look at the total repertoire of explicit (lexical and morphosyntactic) and implicit (discourse-pragmatic) means learners use at a given time of their acquisition.

According to Chung & Timberlake (1985:202), 'in order to describe the tense, aspect, and the mood systems of different languages, we need to identify and compare uses of morphological categories across languages in terms of a universal descriptive framework. The best candidate for such a framework seems to be one based (at least in part) on *a priori* distinctions'. In this paper we will adopt a descriptive framework based on a fo-to-fu approach: a functional-semantic approach consisting in establishing the environments in which a given grammatical category is used (function), and the meaning of the category in each of the environments (semantics).

A good example of functional-semantic approach is provided by Comrie (1976:56) in the description of English Present Perfect. As we will see in section 2.2., English Present perfect can express four different meanings, according to context: the perfect of result, the experiential perfect, the perfect of persistent situation and the perfect of recent past. When applying this model to other languages and tenses, we discover that perfect form and meaning

do not always convey: taking into account all the possible combinations of [ $\pm$  perfect form] and [ $\pm$  perfect function], we can have verb phrases which are perfect both in form and in function, verb phrases which are perfect in function but not in form, verb phrases which are perfect in form but not in function, and verb phrases which are perfect neither in form nor in function. This lack of correspondence between form and function is found in English, Spanish and Italian. All English and Spanish perfects in form are also perfects in meaning in both languages, but there are 'perfect meanings' expressed with other forms. In Italian, 'perfect forms' do not always express 'perfect meanings', as we will see in section 2.4.

## **2.2. The English past tenses: simple past vs. present perfect**

As far as grammatical aspect is concerned, English marks the progressive, the perfect, the perfect progressive, and the simple aspect (Biber et al., 1999:461). Far from going into an exhaustive analysis of aspect distribution across the English tense-system, for it has already been described by many scholars, the aim of this section is to provide a brief account of the English simple past / present perfect opposition.

The difference between the present perfect and the simple past in English has been a much debated issue but none of the theories proposed to account for this problematic distinction seem to account fully for all the facts, even if all scholars seem to agree in one major point (Currell, 1990:23-25): the present perfect express a past which is somehow related to the time of utterance, whereas the simple past expresses a past disconnected from the time of utterance. According to Quirk et al. (1985:189) 'the overlap of meaning between tense and aspect is most problematic in English in the choice that has to be made between simple past and present perfective [present perfect]'. If we take, for example, two sentences such as the following: (a) John *lived* in the USA for ten years, and (b) John *has lived* in the USA for ten years, it is clear that both verb phrases indicate situations previous to the present moment; the difference between the two sentences, then, is not a difference of tense because they not indicate different locations in time. The present perfect implies 'current relevance', the past tense does not. Indeed, according to some grammarians (Comrie, 1985:25; Givón, 2001:296-297), the defining characteristic of the English present perfect tense is the fact that an event described using this tense suggests that the past events are somehow pertinent for the reference point because, e.g., the results of the event may still be in force. Current relevance of an event in the present perfect tense relies on the role of the auxiliary *have*, which situates the event in the dominion of the reference point.

Comrie (1976:62) observes that the perfect aspect in English is different to other aspects, as it does not tell us so much about the internal temporal situation of the event, action, process, etc., but relates it to a preceding time. Therefore, the present perfect expresses a relationship between a present state and a past situation. This makes perfect very close to a tense when compared to other aspects (Huddleston, 1984:164). For a discussion of the categorization of the perfect as either a tense or an aspect, see McCoard (1978). As I have suggested in section 2.2., Comrie (1976:61-65) maintains that the current relevance of a situation in the past can be manifested in four different ways: the perfect of result, the perfect of experience, the perfect of recent past and the perfect of persistent situation. While the first three types are perfective, the last is imperfective in nature.

- (a) The *perfect of result* expresses a state that continues to hold as a result of a past situation, as in ‘*Mary has left London*’. This meaning is clearest with verbs that denote the change from one state to another.
- (b) The *experiential perfect* indicates that a situation has held at least once during a period of time in the past. In ‘*Mary has been to London*’, the event has taken place at least once, but it is not necessarily a recent event, and there is no implication that the situation persists. The end point of the period is always the present, whereas the beginning point can be specified (‘*Mary has been to London twice since she married John*’) or not, in which case it may be understood from the context or shared knowledge between the interlocutors. In this use the exact time is considered unnecessary or irrelevant to the speaker.
- (c) The *perfect of recent past*, also called *hot news perfect* (McCawley, 1971:104), describes situations such as ‘*Mary has just come back*’, that are understood as temporally close to the present.
- (d) The *perfect of persistent situation* describes sentences like ‘*Mary has waited for two hours*’, in which the situation started in the past but continues into the present. An adverb of duration is usually required for this use (Leech 1971:31).

English simple past tense, on the other hand, temporally locates situations, at least partially, prior to the time of utterance, that is, it is used in reference to some definite time in the past that took place before the present moment and excludes the present (Leech, 1971:9-12). Thus, it can be referred to as the ‘exclusive past’ (Huddleston, 1984:158), in opposition to present perfect as the ‘inclusive past’ (Huddleston, *ibid*).

The interaction of simple past tense with situation types will be briefly examined now. Simple past tense does not restrict states and habitual statives to a past time. Regardless of whether or not a past state or habitual stative extends into the present time, past tense must be used if a past reference time is given (Comrie, 1985). Even if the sentence does not actually provide a past reference time, in the context of a past situation, continuing states are usually described with past tense, as in *'I loved drawing when I was a child and I still do'*. Dynamic situations on the other hand are presented perfectly with English simple past tense and cannot extend beyond past time, as in *'I built a house'*. The addition of information contradicting the completion of a telic situation with past tense creates an anomalous sentence (Smith, 1991), as in *'\*I built a house but I didn't finish building it'*. In summary, the event time of dynamic situations with English simple past tense cannot extend beyond time of utterance. The event time of states and habitual statives with simple past, however, is not restricted to past time and may extend into present and future time, as long as the reference time or context is located in the past.

In addition to the 'prototypical' use of past tense, there are other uses. Some other uses of past simple would include (a) *ackshifting* (Huddleston, 1984), where a verb in a subordinate clause, within a larger clause that contains a past tensed verb, will also be in past tense, as in the case of indirect speech. (*'He said you had some interesting books'*); (b) the *attitudinal past* (Quirk et al., 1972: 86), where a past simple indicates the attitude of the speakers rather than a past time and it denotes a polite request (*'Did you want to see me?'*); and, (c) the expression of *factual remoteness* (Huddleston, 1984) and hypothetical situations, as in 'if' and 'wish' clauses (conditionals).

### **2.3. The Spanish past tenses: *pretérito indefinido* vs. *pretérito perfecto***

In order to better understand the nature of both Spanish and Italian simple and compound past, a brief account of the origins of the distinction between perfect and preterite in Romance languages will be given on the first place. Afterwards, I will focus on the opposition between *pretérito indefinido* and *pretérito perfecto* in Spanish. The situation in Italian will be presented in section 2.4.

A topic of great interest in Romance linguistics is the changes in the relationship between preterite and present perfect. What scholars in this area have found particularly striking is the instability of the present perfect throughout the Romance languages. The Romance simple past (such as Spanish *pretérito indefinido* and Italian *passato remoto*) is in

most cases the direct descendant of the Latin Perfect, a tense which, at the stage of the Classical language, had already developed into a general purpose perfective past. According to Salvi (1987:225), those Romance periphrastic verb forms for the expression of anteriority consisting on a past participle of the verb accompanied by the auxiliary ‘*habere*’ (es. *pretérito perfecto*, it. *passato prossimo*) derive from Latin constructions of the type: *habeo epistulam scriptam* (‘I have a written letter’), where ‘*habeo*’ expresses possession and is not yet the Romance auxiliary, ‘*epistolarum*’ is the direct object, and ‘*scriptam*’ is the object complement. In Latin only those participles which could act as adjectives were possible, that is, the participles of imperfective verbs and the participles of those perfective verbs that had a resultative meaning. After a process of semantic and syntactic evolution, whose description exceeds the aims of this paper, the resulting structure ‘fulfilled the purpose of reintroducing into the paradigm a true perfect’ (Bertinetto & Squartini, 2000:404). The main changes reflected by that new structure included the following: (a) the coincidence between the subject of the inflected verb and the subject of the perfect participle became obligatory; (b) the perfect participle became part of the verb, and manifested a strong inclination to lose the original gender and number agreement with the direct object, while the respective order of inflected verb and perfect participle became increasingly fixed, with severe restrictions with regard to the type of syntactic constituents allowed to appear in between; and, (c) the inflected verb lost its lexical meaning and became a true auxiliary.

In order to clarify the subsequent development of the opposition between the simple and compound past in the various Romance languages, Harris (1982) proposes the following four-stage diachronic model: (a) in the stage I, the CP is restricted to present states resulting from past actions, and is not used to describe past actions themselves, however recent (as in some Southern Italian vernacular varieties); (b) in the stage II, the CP occurs only in highly specific circumstances such as contexts aspectually marked as durative or repetitive parallel to English *I have lived here / been living here all my life; I have often seen him at the theatre* (as in Galician and Portuguese, and in many varieties of American Spanish); (c) in the stage III, the CP expresses the archetypal present perfect value of past action with present relevance (as in Castilian Spanish and some varieties of langue d’oil and langue d’oc); and (d) in the stage IV, the CP also expresses the preterital or aoristic functions, while the SP is restricted to formal registers (as in Standard French, Northern Italian, Standard and Romanian).

Traditionally, Spanish past tenses have been considered to convey both temporal and aspectual information (Gili Gaya, 1961; King, 1992). This is clearly the case for the so-called

compound tenses, including the *pretérito perfecto*. Aspectual and temporal information are also combined in the so called simple tenses, in particular the two contrastive forms of the past domain, the *pretérito indefinido* and the *imperfecto*. The *indefinido* is similar to English simple past, except that it implies the end of the event or state denoted. Gili Gaya (1961) also attributes to the *indefinido* a sense of perfection and punctuality, particularly when occurring with telic events. In contrast, the *imperfecto* is normally said to represent an event in progress and not necessarily finished.

The perfective tenses most commonly used are *pretérito indefinido* (simple past), and, *pretérito perfecto* (compound past). The simple form expresses an action accomplished within a time frame which, to the speaker, is part of the past. By contrast, the compound form expresses an action carried out within a unit of time which is not yet finished in reference to the speaker.

#### **2.4. The Italian past tenses: *passato remoto* vs. *passato prossimo***

This section outlines the tense-aspect forms pertaining to the study proposal: the *passato prossimo* (PP) and the *passato remoto* (PR). I will not consider here the case of the *imperfetto*. As indicated by their names, the *passato remoto* seems to encode a distant past, whereas the *passato prossimo* seems to encode close one. Thus, according to the traditional grammatical descriptions, the PR is a ‘preterite’ and the PP is a ‘perfect’ (Centineo, 1991:56). We will see, however, that whereas the former conflates perfective and perfect aspect, the latter is a perfective past (Bertinetto, 1997): the PR is, in fact, a perfective past used for narrative purposes in the written language; in the spoken language it is present in the central and southern varieties but it is absent in the northern ones.

Current experience seems to indicate that the *passato remoto* is gradually disappearing from the conversational Italian and restricting to formal written discourses. Whenever the two preterit forms co-occur in a narrative, the PR presumably encodes narration *per se*, while the PP appears in direct quote, miming the conversational usage of the form (Lepschy & Lepschy, 1981; Bertinetto, 1986). According to Bertinetto & Squartini (2000), the Italian simple past is used in literary text, ‘as indeed also happens in French, where this tense fulfils the specifically aoristic function of a propulsive (or foregrounding) tense. The *passato prossimo* is a compound tense consisting of an auxiliary (*avere* or *essere*) followed by a past participle. The phenomenon of the auxiliary selection largely exceeds the purpose of this paper. Further information on the topic can be found in Centineo (1996). Originally restricted to perfect



aspect, this tense expanded at the expenses of the *passato remoto*. Indeed, in the common speech of the northern regions and in the language of the media, the PR seems to have been completely replaced by the PP (Peyronel & Higgins, 2005: 44).

However, the distinction between PP and PR is not as clear-cut as it might seem on first consultation of normative grammar books. As we have already suggested, the former displays in fact an ambivalent aspectual function and its usage overlaps with that of PR. According to Centineo (1991:55), ‘traditional accounts of the difference between the *passato prossimo* (“near past”) (PP) and *passato remoto* (“remote past”) (PR) underscore the point that in modern standard Italian the two tenses contrast only in written literary discourse, since PR has almost disappeared from conversational use’. Nevertheless, the Italian past tenses alternation is a much more complex issue. Indeed, rather than being determined purely by linguistic factors, the distinction between PP and PR is determined by geographical variety, type of text and degree of formality (Bertinetto, 1986). The tendency to use the PP for both recent and distant events and with aoristic aspect (and to prefer it largely to the PR) is typical of the northern regional varieties especially in informal registers (Lepschy & Lepschy, 1981). In the southern regional varieties, it is the PR that is claimed to be generalised as the perfective form (Sobrero, 1990). This phenomenon ‘is typically attributed to the long-lived Spanish control of the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies during the Bourbons’ time (Vincent & Harris, 1988:315), but it could also have started from the early days of full latinization in these two Romance territories, given that ‘standard’ Peninsular Spanish coincides with ‘standard’ Italian, and not with Sicilian, Napolitano, or Sardinian, in its pattern usage of the present perfect/preterit tandem (Loi Corvetto, 1983: 8)’ (Valle de Antón, 2005:37). Some studies, however, have shown that the PP is extremely widespread also in the South (Alfonzetti, 1997), providing supporting evidence that this tense is expanding its distribution at the expenses of the PR. A complete discussion on the distribution of both tenses across the Italian territory can be found in Bertinetto & Squartini (1996).

## **2.5. Conclusions**

There is a wide range of ways in which language encodes temporal representation. Tense and aspect are markers of temporality on the verb. Whereas *tense* is a deictic category that places the situation in time, generally with respect to the time of utterance, *aspect* expresses the different perspectives a speaker can adopt with regard to the temporal course of the event, action, process, etc. Aspect may be expressed lexically –by the inherent lexical semantics of the verb and other components of the predicate-, and grammatically –through the

use of inflexional morphology or periphrastic expressions-. According to the temporal properties of the situation to which the predicate refers (namely, dynamism, telicity and durativity), verbs are classified into five lexical aspectual categories: states, activities, accomplishments, achievements, and semelfactives. At the level of grammatical aspect, languages express several aspectual oppositions, the most common one being the perfective-imperfective opposition.

Languages grammaticalize aspectual notions differently: on the first place, different languages develop different types of grammatical aspect; and secondly, grammatical aspect makers in different languages also vary in their degree of grammaticalization, which is in turn reflected in their different combinational patterns with lexical aspect.

English encodes two aspectual oppositions: progressive / non-progressive and perfect / non-perfect. The primary function of English *simple past* is deictic, as it locates a situation before the time of utterance. However, English *simple past* conflates perfective and imperfective features. On the other hand, past tenses in Romance languages have three functions that are related to three implicit questions: perfective ('what happened?'), imperfective ('what were the circumstances?') and perfect ('what is the end, the result?'). For a detailed analysis, see Pulgram (1984), who refers to these functions as aoristic, depictive and resultative. The English *past tense* is both aoristic and depictive (Pulgram, 1984), but depictive aspect in English may be also expressed by the past progressive. Spanish and Italian express depictive aspect through the imperfect forms (*pretérito imperfecto / imperfetto*).

Although perfectivity and imperfectivity are conflated in the English simple past, it can be argued that this tense prototypically conveys a perfective meaning. Dalhl (1985:78) considers that a perfective verb 'will typically denote a single event, seen as an unanalyzed whole, with a well-defined result or end-state, located in the past'.

English, Spanish, and Italian differ as to which aspectual distinctions are lexicalized in the past domain. On the first place, Spanish and Italian contrast perfective and imperfective through the opposition *imperfecto/imperfetto* vs. *indefinido/passato prossimo*; English, on the contrary, does not have a SP form that is aspectually [-perfective], so [-perfective] grammatical aspect is manifested analytically. Perfective aspect is agglutinated with tense in the SP and the CP in both English and Spanish. Spanish and English SP and CP are almost coincident in their temporal and aspectual values: both are [+ perfective], and both situate the event before the utterance time, the SP directly and the CP through the auxiliary. However,

the CP imposes a reading of current relevance that is not present in the SP. In the case of SP, only in the combination with states there is no exact correlation between English and Spanish.

The Romance CP started out as a true perfect, but underwent a process of gradual aoristicization, i.e. of transformation into a purely perfective past. This ‘aoristic drift’ can be observed in current Italian. Indeed, the CP in Standard Italian allows for the explicit temporal localization of the event (a typical aoristic function), but it goes without saying that in typically perfectal contexts this tense is by far the preferred (if not the only) choice. Thus, the *passato prossimo* ‘more often corresponds to the English simple past than to the English present perfect’ (Peyronel & Higgins, 2005: 44).

In sum, the main difference between Spanish and Italian, on one hand, and English, on the other hand, with respect to [-perfective] grammatical aspect is that it can be manifested synthetically and analytically in Spanish while only the second option is available for English. As far as [+perfective] is concerned, Italian uses almost exclusively CP, whereas Spanish and English opt for either the simple or the compound tense depending on the notion of current relevance: ‘the key distinction is that the ‘present perfect’ is a category used to refer to a situation located in the past which includes the present or is still relevant at the speech time, whereas the ‘preterite’ is a category used to refer to a completed past event that has no present relevance’ (Harris, 1982:43).

### **3. The proposal for an empirical study**

In this section we will present a proposal for the empirical study of transfer from the L2 to the L3 in the use of English simple past by L1 Italian / L2 Spanish students of L3 English in a classroom setting.

In section 3.1., I will recapitulate the main conclusions from chapters 1 and 2, which will constitute the theoretical framework for my study proposal. In section 3.2., I will declare the objectives of the projected research. Then, section 3.3. will be devoted to the formulation of the research questions and hypothesis. The expected results will be also commented there. In section 3.4., I will illustrate some methodological issues such as the participants, the materials, and the procedure to be employed. Finally, in section 3.5., I will offer some final remarks concerning aspects that, in my opinion, need further study before carrying out the actual experiment.

#### **3.1. Introduction**

We live in a world where learning two or more foreign languages is no longer exceptional. That is why researchers have become more and more interested in third language acquisition and in the influence additional languages have on the acquisition of a new language, i.e. cross-linguistic influence.

In the course of research a set of factors affecting transfer was identified. These include psychotypical distance of the involved languages and recency of use of the languages. Kellerman (1983) claimed that transfer is determined by the speaker's subjective perception of the linguistic distance (similarity) between the languages known to him/her, psychotology. As far as the recency effect (a tendency to transfer more from the foreign language actively used by the speaker) is concerned, it was proven a significant factor e.g. in Hammarberg's (2001) study where his informant transferred more from the foreign language she most recently used.

The acquisition of verbal systems constitutes one of the most problematic areas for foreign language learners. That is because different languages give different formal priorities to temporal functions and L2 learners look for means in the second language to fulfil the temporal notions they already know in their first language. In fully-fledged languages, for example, tense and aspect notions are often packaged into one complex inflected verbal form. However, the grammatical encoding of these notions differs from language to language. In

Slobin's words (1991:23), 'each native language has trained its speakers to pay different kinds of attention to events and experiences when talking about them. This training is carried out in childhood and is exceptionally resistant to restructuring in adult second-language acquisition'. These cognitive and linguistic predispositions must cause learners much frustration.

According to Ayoun & Salaberry (2008:abstract), 'the acquisition of English verbal morphology has been mostly tested as a second language (L2) in English-speaking settings (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1998; Bardovi-Harlig & Bergström, 1996; Bayley, 1991, 1994), more rarely as a foreign language (e.g., Robison, 1990, 1995), and in only one cross-sectional study with native speakers of French in a foreign/L2 setting in Quebec (Collins, 2002)'. These authors carry out a cross-sectional study with French speakers learning English in France in which they try to establish whether the L1 lead French to overuse the English present perfect due to its morphological similarity with the *passé composé*, a pattern 'similar in form but not in function to the French *passé composé*', as found by Collins (2002:85) in the case of telic verbs. These findings are consistent with Housen's (2002:163) statement that the delay in the contrastive use of simple past and perfect is a general trend in the L2 acquisition of English (Dietrich et al., 1995; Bardovi-Harling, 1997), even in the case of learners who received focused instruction on this contrast (Buczowska & Weist, 1991; Pienemann, 1987).

The conscious marking of the distinction between deictic past vs. anaphoric anterior tense, expressed in Standard English by the contrast between the simple past and the present perfect forms is likely to represent a major source of trouble among Italian speakers, whose L1 does not mark such an opposition and employs in both cases a unique form (the *passato prossimo*). Indeed, current experience indicates that Italian learners of L2 Spanish overuse the Spanish *pretérito perfecto* at the expenses of the *pretérito indefinido*, even after having received focused instruction.

This chapter contains a proposal for a study to be conducted in order to examine the occurrence transfer of aspectual knowledge from the L2 to the L3. I base my proposal on the experiment described in Salaberry (2005), where he studies transfer of knowledge about past tense aspectual contrast from L2 Spanish to L3 Portuguese, and finds that English/Spanish bilingual adults learning Portuguese in a classroom setting transfer their knowledge of perfective/imperfective aspectual contrast represented in their L2 knowledge of Spanish, even if many of them have trouble with the selection of the appropriate inflexional marker with

stative verbs. I will focus my attention, instead, on the acquisition of perfect/preterit opposition in English, which is strange to Standard Italian and, particularly, to the Sardinian variety (Loi Corvetto, 1983:8).

My core purpose is to study cross-linguistic influence on native Italian L3 learners of English. As a part of the participants in the study will have previously acquired additional languages, my interest is not restricted to studying the influence of the learners' native language but especially the influence of other previously acquired languages, particularly Spanish, as well as determining the influence of psychotypology in the eventuality of transfer occurrence.

I aim, therefore, to firstly verify whether a similar tendency is present in Italian learners of English, and in such a case, to search for evidence of transfer -either positive or negative- from L2 Spanish. Finally, I want to establish to what extent that transfer is linked to the perceived similarity between both the L2 and the L3 tenses.

### **3.2. Research questions and hypotheses**

The proposed study intends to survey the effects of L2 knowledge of a particular tense opposition in the use of L3 tenses by analyzing data from Italian speakers learning L2 Spanish and L3 English in a classroom setting. The questions that would guide such study are:

- i. Do Italian speakers show L1 negative transfer in their use of English past tenses?
- ii. Can the knowledge of a similar to-some-extend feature in the L2 influence the use of an L3 feature (namely, the opposition between simple past and present perfect)?
- iii. When these similarities operate resulting in transfer, are learners conscious of them?

The above research questions may be more precisely formulated through the two following general hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Italian-speaking learners of English/Spanish will show a tendency to mark simple past with perfect morphology, as simple past is expressed in Italian with morphology that is structurally similar to English/Spanish perfect morphology. The assumption that the contrast between SP and CP in English and Spanish will represent a source of trouble for Italian L1 speakers is based in parallel findings in the case of French learners of English in different contexts and with different levels of proficiency (Housen, 2002; Collins, 2002; Ayoun & Salaberry, 2008). The existence in both English and Spanish of a pattern similar in form but not in function to the Italian CP *passato prossimo*, a form that

conflates perfective and perfect aspect, would lead Italian learners of those languages to incorrectly use the CP in situations requiring the use of the SP forms.

Hypothesis 2. In the case of L3 English, those L2 proficient learners of Spanish that have acquired past tense morphology in the L2 and are not longer under the effects of L1 negative transfer will show the effects of transfer from the L2 to the L3. In the case of those learners who had acquired the knowledge of contrast between the SP and the CP forms in Spanish, this knowledge is expected to be transferred to the L3 English forms. The expected characteristics of such transfer are reflected in hypothesis 3 and 4.

Hypothesis 3. L2 to L3 transfer will affect the whole SP/CP opposition universe, resulting in positive transfer when both languages are similar, and affecting negatively where English and Spanish differ. According to this, positive transfer would transfer in those areas where both the L2 and the L3 behave similarly, whereas divergences between both languages would be a source of negative transfer.

Hypothesis 4. The extent of L2 to L3 transfer will be larger in those cases where L2 have been previously activated. The occurrence of transfer will be higher among those subjects who will have carried out a prior task involving the use of the L2 distinction between SP and CP. That means that the activation of L2 knowledge would act as a facilitating factor for transfer.

### **3.3. Methodology**

This section deals with the research design. I will consider here the characteristics of the participants on the experiment as well as the procedure.

On the first place, I will consider the participants. The population for this study should include three different tests groups, all of them Italian native speakers studying English as a third language in a classroom environment. The second language would be Spanish for two of them, and French for the third one. All the participants would be students of the last year of secondary education in a high school in Sardine (Italy), thus aged 18-19. Participants in groups 1 and 2 would be at the last year of a *Liceo Linguistico Internazionale (ad opzione spagnolo)*. Consequently, they would have followed at least five years of instruction of the L2 and three years of the L3. Their syllabus would include subjects in the L2 (literature and history), so their knowledge of Spanish is to be consider as proficient. Participants of group 3

would have followed five years of L2 instruction (French) and three years of L3 instruction. The characteristics of the L3 instruction are considered similar for all the groups.

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
L1	Italian	Italian	Italian
L2	Spanish	Spanish	French
L3	English	English	English

As I have suggested in the introduction of chapter 1, English is considered the L3 from the point of view of proficiency. In effect, all the participants are likely to have received any English instruction at the primary school, previously to the study of those I will consider as the L2. The levels of proficiency reached as a result of that instruction are so low that, particularly in the area of SP/CP contrast, the prior to the L2 instruction knowledge of English seems irrelevant to my research.

I will include now some considerations on the materials and the procedure. The experiment will compress three questionnaires: the L2 questionnaire, the L3 questionnaire, and the psychotypological questionnaire. The three questionnaires taken together seek to find support or ground for the rejection of the hypotheses listed in section 3.2.

The L2 and the L3 questionnaire will be similar in structure. Both questionnaires will be divided into two parts. Participants will firstly have to provide verb forms for the sentences in L2/L3. The second part will be an error-recognition test, where students will be given example sentences in L2/L3, some of which will be correct and some incorrect. The students will be asked to mark the incorrect sentences. They will be also asked to suggest a corrected version of the sentence. These sentences will be formed in such a way as to establish context and limit the choice of possible correct answers.

The last questionnaire will examine participants' view on the similarity between English, Spanish and Italian as they will be asked to answer a set of multiple choice questions concerning their perception of language distance. Participants from groups 1 and 2 will be asked about their subjective perception of similarity between languages in SP/CP contrasts. Additionally, participants will be asked about the strategies they employ when searching for an English verb form. The aim of this is to check if participants show preference for using Spanish as a prop in using English which could result from the perceived similarity of languages. Information obtained from the questions will be later interpreted against the data from the main study.



Participants from group 1 will start by filling in the L2 questionnaire, in order to activate the knowledge of SP/CP contrast in Spanish. Groups 2 and 3 will start, instead, with the L3 questionnaire. Both groups 1 and 2 will finish by filling in the psychotypological questionnaire.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
L2 questionnaire	-	-
L3 questionnaire	L3 questionnaire	L3 questionnaire
psychotypological questionnaire	psychotypological questionnaire	-

### 3.4. Final remarks

We live in a world where learning two or more languages is no longer exceptional. That is why researchers have become more and more interested in third language acquisition and in the influence additional languages have on the acquisition of a new language. In this chapter, I have presented a proposal for the study of the transfer of knowledge of tense-aspectual oppositions from the L2 to the L3. This kind of research could be of great value in order to improve English teaching strategies in the context of the *Secciones Españolas* in Italy. Presumably, a similar experiment in the case of the *Secciones Españolas* in France would also reveal interesting and useful results. But the relevance of this type of research is not limited to these contexts. With Spanish gaining ground as the emergent L2 in both Italian and French schools, English is, in an increasing number of cases, being downgraded to the L3 position. This circumstance confers a new significance to the study of transfer from L2 Spanish to L3 English.

I should recognize, however, some limitations on my proposal. First of all, I have only considered morphological tense marking. In effect, according to Salaberry (2005:184) ‘although it is methodologically possible to circumscribe the analysis of tense-aspect use to some limited environment (e.g., a morphosyntactic analysis without considering the effect of adverbials and the context in general), such analysis should recognize its limitations in scope (cf., Schwartz 1993; Slabakova & Montrul forthcoming)’. My proposal, therefore, must be considered just a first approach to the issue of L2 to L3 transfer of tense/aspect knowledge, as further research in the fields of adverbial constraints to tense/aspect marking would be necessary in order to completely understand the circumstance of this type of cross-linguistic influence.

In addition to this, I have dodged the discussion about the nature of transfer. According to Odlin (1989), transfer is seen as a process -or, more precisely, as a part of the

learning process- when the focus is on what the learner has done. Transfer is thus opposed to the product of transfer, i.e. the actual form or structure resulting from transfer. Schachter (1983), on the contrary, sees transfer as a strategy, as a set of constraints that the learner's previous knowledge 'imposes on the domains from which to select hypothesis about the new data one is attending to' (1983:104). In this case, transfer can be seen as a strategy the learners use in order to solve communication problems, on one hand, and as a learning strategy, on the other (Manchón, 1988). In any case, 'whether transfer is seen as a process or a strategy depends on the focus on takes, rather than on the nature of transfer itself' (Celaya, 1990:150). As far as my study proposal is concerned, we should take into account that the participants are L3 learners whose instruction is still on course and that the experiment procedure does not include real communicative tasks.

In foreign language teaching, promoting learner's insight means reducing the perceived arbitrariness of the foreign language system. The learner perceives something as arbitrary if he or she can see no reason why it should be as it is. For this reason, it is not enough to merely inform the learner that a particular element belongs to a given formal category and not to another. Rather, we need to explain to the learner why the foreign language should be as it is. Reference to metalinguistic knowledge is continuous in our daily practice as language instructors. Teachers agree, nowadays, that the learners' L1 can constitute a useful basis in order to establish links with the foreign language. In my opinion, so we should do with other languages our students know. Contrastivity must be regarded as a useful tool in language learning, but far from been limited to the L1, it must be extended to other previously acquired languages. With this dissertation I hope to have given a little contribute to the study of an area whose relevance for English teaching is growing: L2 to L3 transfer.

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