SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC FACTORS IN L1 AND L2 MOOD INTERPRETATION

Research on interpreting mood alternation in L2 (Borgonovo and Prévost 2003; Borgonovo et al. 2008) has shown a high degree of variability in judgements not only of L2 speakers, but also, and sometimes to an even greater degree, of native speakers used as control group. In a recent study (authors 2012, 2013) on L1 French and English speakers' acquisition of L2 Spanish verbal mood alternation in concessive and conditional clauses, native Spanish-speaker variability, especially in concessive environments, was remarkably higher than that of the L2 speakers. The study consisted of thirty written, multiple-choice questions in which participants chose among three interpretations of contextualised utterances. Only one option was considered appropriate; however, some native speakers chose other answers or rejected all of the options presented.

In order to identify the factors that underlie this aspect of L1 variability we have conducted a follow-on study related to the interpretation of mood alternation in concessives. We present data obtained from a group of forty L1 Spanish speakers, through a written multiple-choice production test with an additional metalinguistic component, where the subjects were asked to provide a guided explanation of their indicative or subjunctive mood preference within the contexts provided.

In accordance with Sperber & Wilson's relevance theory, the context of an utterance is best conceived of as a set of assumptions that are accessible to participants in a given communicative exchange. We view the semantics of mood as encoding what is known in relevance theory as a procedural meaning, i.e. abstract indications that restrict inferential utterance interpretation processes, by highlighting or making more accessible certain assumptions which are integrated into the inferential processes (Blakemore 1987; Wilson and Sperber 1993; Escandell-Vidal, Leonetti and Ahern 2011).

Thus, for the data we consider, our hypothesis is that the causes of the variability found in L1 and L2 speakers are situated in different domains. In the case of native speakers, the variability is an indication the use of a richer and more diverse array of contextual assumptions available to these subjects for online interpretative processes, as compared to the L2 speakers. Conversely, the L2 variability found is due to incomplete acquisition of mood as a grammatical feature.

This difference seems to underlie the types of variability found in the aforementioned study (authors 2012, 2013). In the interpretation task that was used, native speakers were less effective when choosing between interpretations requiring a greater degree of contextual enrichment, whereas the L2 speakers were more hesitant when requested to interpret utterances with grammatical tense and mood combinations that were less frequent in the instructional input.

Considering these findings, the follow-on study provides insight into the factors that native speakers take into account when choosing and interpreting mood, as well as these subjects' varying degrees of sensitivity to the subtle distinctions involved in mood alternation.