The acquisition of tense and aspect in Mòoré (Gur, Niger-Congo)

Despite huge literature on tense-aspect acquisition, little attention has so far been devoted to African languages. This paper intends to broaden our knowledge in terms of typological coverage. In addition, it addresses an important issue concerning the actual role of aspect in the acquisition process. As is well-known, the still largely accepted Aspect Priority Hypothesis (also known under other names) claims that the triggering factor in the acquisition process lies in the effect of aspect on tense, or rather in the joined effect of aspect and actionality (also known as ‘lexical aspect’), for those (nowadays the majority) who admit that aspect and actionality are two different components of tense-aspect semantics.

Mòoré (a Gur language belonging to the huge Niger-Congo family) is an almost ideal case in point, since its verb structure is definitely aspect-prominent, in the sense defined by Bhat (1999). Indeed, virtually every tense is split between a perfective and an imperfective form, including the imperative, where one can distinguish between episodic vs habitual injunctions (e.g. Drink your medicine now / every day). This allows one to test the (supposedly universal) aspect-based acquisition strategy in a much more direct way than in any other case so-far explored, including the Slavic languages, where (with the exception of Bulgarian and Macedonian) one finds a syncretic system in which aspect and actionality are strictly interwoven. In practice, Slavic languages may be considered to have a defective system, whereby it is characteristics impossible, for a (morphologically) ‘perfective’ verb, to convey (imperfective) present-reference, as opposed to (perfective) past-reference. Although all verb systems present at least some degree of defectiveness (i.e. neutralizations of semantically relevant values), the crucial point is that the just described situation depletes the very possibility of testing the Aspect Priority Hypothesis. Fortunately, languages like Moore can, to a large extent, offer a remedy.

The results of a one-year longitudinal investigation, based on regular recording of 4 children between (approximately) 1;6 and 2;6 in a village near Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), showed that, despite the almost complete degree of explicitness of the aspectually-marked Mòoré forms, aspect does not play the leading role. On the contrary, the data confirmed the view proposed by Bertinetto et al. (2015), suggesting that the acquisition process is first and foremost driven by the children’s deep sensitivity to the morphological features of the target language (what they called ‘Morphology-Sensitive Approach’). In particular, the children’s learning behavior was heavily conditioned by the following two factors:

1) the degree of semantic explicitness, which implies reduced speed of acquisition for TAM forms that are in a one-to-many relation with respect to semantic values;

2) the degree of morphotactic transparence, which implies reduced speed of acquisition for any tense that challenges the learner with morphophonological complications, or with irregular declension paradigms (unless, in the latter case, the forms to be learned are supported by high frequency of occurrence).

What is especially telling is that the four children analyzed in the study learned the morphophonologically simpler forms earlier than some of the aspectually explicit, but morphophonologically more complex ones. For instance, they learned fairly early the (imperfectly used) Present tense of the irregular verbs, in contrast to the regular verbs Present, because the latter form involves a good deal of morphophonological processes. This proves that the aspectual value as such did not offer the learning child the kind of support presupposed by the Aspect Priority Hypothesis. In addition, and quite significantly, the four children learned the Future tense (which is a later acquisition for L1 learners of Indo-European languages) earlier than the Present or the Imperfective Past of regular verbs, precisely because the morphological structure of the Moore Future tense is morphotactically transparent.

References cited


Bertinetto, Pier Marco; Freiberger, Eva Maria; Lenci, Alessandro; Noccetti, Sabrina; Agonigi, Maddalena 2015. The acquisition of tense and aspect in a morphology-sensitive framework. Data from Italian and Austrian German children. Linguistics 53,5. 1113-1168.