EFFECT OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE ON SPANISH LEARNERS' PRODUCTION OF ENGLISH EMBEDDED INTERROGATIVE CLAUSES

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ABSTRACT. This paper tries to articulate from the point of view of linguistic theory how Spanish native grammatical competence of embedded indirect questions, as characterized by the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), can influence knowledge and production of such structures in non-native English by adult Spanish learners. A theory on the difference between native and adult non-native acquisition is also invoked in order to support the need for explicitly teaching and making adult learners aware of the differences between the two languages for these particular structures.

KEY WORDS: grammatical competence, embedded indirect questions, minimalist program, native and non-native language acquisition.

RESUMEN. Este trabajo intenta articular desde el punto de vista de la teoría lingüística cómo la competencia gramatical nativa respecto a las oraciones interrogativas indirectas del español peninsular –tal como las caracteriza el Programa Minimalista (Chomsky 1995)- puede influir en el análisis y en la producción de dichas estructuras en el inglés no nativo de los estudiantes castellanohablantes adultos. Se acude también a una teoría sobre las diferencias entre la adquisición de una lengua nativa y el aprendizaje adulto de una no nativa para apoyar la necesidad de la enseñanza explícita de las citadas construcciones y de hacer conscientes a dichos estudiantes de las diferencias estructurales entre ambas lenguas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: competencia gramatical, oraciones interrogativas indirectas, programa minimalista, adquisición nativa y no nativa del lenguaje.

1. The problem

Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Spain have first-hand experience with their (peninsular) Spanish speaking students of their clear tendency to produce and accept[1] indirect embedded questions that are ungrammatical in Modern Standard English (MSE) because of the subject-auxiliary (S-Aux) inversion they show, which in this variety is only grammatical in direct (root) questions. We have in mind examples like the following two, taken from learners' actual written utterances, both produced by two adult high-intermediate EFL students and transcribed below along with their grammatical native versions and corresponding Spanish glosses:

(1) *She asked why hadn't he arrived yet
    'She asked   why   he hadn't   arrived   yet'
  (Ella) Preguntó por qué (?él) no había (??él) llegado (él) aún

 (2) *She wanted to know where did Helen live
    'She wanted   to know where   Helen   lived'
   (Ella) Quería   saber dónde (??Helen) vivía (Helen)

These two examples present S-Aux inversion and the second one even provides *do* support, that is, it seems as if these students are treating them like direct questions, or, putting it in different terms, they are overgeneralizing the structure of English direct (root) questions to indirect (embedded) ones. We will try to characterize the grammatical structure of these non-native sentences from a contrastive analysis perspective using as a reference frame the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995), as presented by Radford (1997). Linguistic, acquisitional and -secondarily- pedagogical consequences will also be drawn.

2. Direct and indirect questions in English and Spanish

    The Minimalist Program assumes that S-Aux inversion in MSE direct questions is a consequence of head movement whereby the head Inflection[2] (I), the syntactic functional category comprising finite auxiliaries and infinitival *to* from which clauses –formulated here as Inflectional Phrases (IPs)- project, raises by 'attraction' to the (next higher head) Complementizer (C) position, the head which projects those embedded clauses – Complementizer Phrases (CPs)- introduced by complementizers (such as *that*, *if* and *for*). In such structures C is a "strong" head containing a strong abstract affix (Q), which means that it must be adjoined to a head. This head is the Aux element under I, the next lower head which rises to join it, as head movement has to keep to the principle of *strict cyclicity*, which favors the shortest head-to-head movement, be it a modal, perfective or progressive auxiliary or *do* support (use of the dummy auxiliary *do*). This is represented (in a simplified way[3]) in the structural tree in (3), along with a possible Wh-question with the Wh-word in its Specifier -position preceding the phrase head- "landing" site, with the traces (t) left by movement from the original places:
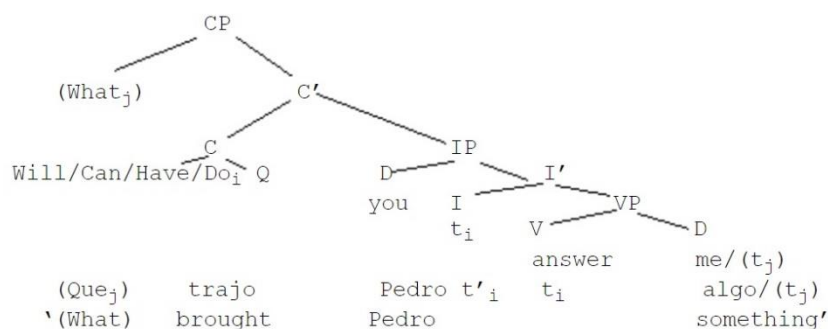
In Peninsular Spanish -as well as in French or Early Modern English- lexical verbs invert with the subject both in yes/no and Wh-root questions, as can be seen in examples (4), (5) and (6) below. This is possible, following the Minimalist program, because they have strong agreement features -manifested in a rich system of agreement inflections- which allow them first to raise from V to I[4] and then to C in order to adjoin to the strong affix contained in this head, as represented also in (3) for the sentence *Trajo/Ha traído Pedro algo?* ('Did/Has Pedro bring/brought anything?').

(4) ¿Viene Juan por la tarde?
   Comes Juan in the afternoon
  'Does Juan come the afternoons?'

(5) ¿Qué trajo   Pedro ayer?
   What brought Pedro yesterday
  'What did Pedro bring yesterday?'

(6) ¿Qué dijiste   que trajo   Pedro ayer?
   What said-you that brought Pedro yesterday
  'What did you say Pedro brought yesterday?'

However, as shown in examples (1) and (2), in MSE S-Aux inversion is not allowed in embedded (indirect) questions. In this case, it is assumed either that C is weak, not containing a strong affix needing to adjoin to a

head, or that embedded questions have a covert null complementizer[5] which adjoins to the strong affix within C, thus satisfying by merger -the basic operation which creates structural trees by combining pairs of categories to form larger structures- instead of movement, the latter's need to be adjoined to a head.

In Peninsular Spanish, our L1 in this case, subject-verb inversion is also preferred in embedded questions, as marked by interrogation marks for the less preferred positions in the Spanish glosses to examples (1) and (2) or in example (6)[6]. This clear preference, following Minimalist assumptions, might point to Spanish embedded CPs also containing a (verbal) head C with a strong Q affix which must be adjoined to a head[7]. This is realized here by verb (head) movement, as in Spanish verbs have strong agreement features.

3. Transfer and/or overgeneralization

Taking into account the previous discussion, one could think that our Spanish adult students either transfer the functional "skeleton" or structure of their native or first language (L1) with that embedded strong head C into English, their target or second language (L2) in this case, or they overgeneralize the structure of the L2 root questions to embedded ones or that either option reinforce the other, which leads them to produce S-Aux inversion[8]. The latter possibility would be consistent with those L2 acquisition theories (cf. Andersen 1990) which postulate that a certain item will appear in the non-native L2 if it is consistent both with the L1 and what they call 'general acquisition principles'. These are strategies or learning procedures encompassing L2 learning. In this case the general acquisition principle would be the null hypothesis of supposing that all questions (root or embedded) have the same structure.

What students at this level of proficiency never accept or produce either in root or embedded questions is Subject-Verb inversion as in their L1. They rather invert consistently the modal or primary auxiliary (they acquire *do*-support early) even though this is not coherent with the L1, as can be seen in the Spanish translations of sentences (1) and (2), where the least likely position for the subject to appear is that following the auxiliary. This shows that even if there is transfer, it is not of surface aspects of the L1 but of the functional characteristics of the L1 -that is, of the [+STRONG] feature value of the functional category C. At the same time these learners are functioning within the rules of the L2 and know that lexical verbs in MSE cannot raise to C.

Thus, L2 learning does not consist simply in the *relexification* or dressing up of the structures of the L1 in L2 words, but a different process where the underlying grammars of both the L1 and L2 seem to be at work and which the framework we have used allows us to formalize. This is consistent with Liceras's model of L2 acquisition (1996), according to which when adults learn an L2 they restructure (parts of) the linguistic representations they already possess on the model of the L2 surface structure because their learning procedures, unlike those of L1 acquisition, cannot accede the feature values of the functional or lexical elements being acquired or learned.

4. Pedagogical consequences

From the linguistic and acquisitional characterization presented above, one can conclude that, in terms of pedagogical rules, our Spanish adult students must be taught that S-Aux inversion cannot take place in embedded indirect questions, as the feature values of the functional categories may be inaccessible to adult L2 acquisition. This could involve the explicit teaching of the concept and formulation of both direct and indirect questions and showing that while in the former the first auxiliary (or a corresponding *do* form in its absence) is raised to the front of the sentence or immediately after the Wh-word, in the latter no such raising takes place.

We can expect that at the beginning of L2 learning there will be transfer from the L1, which favors inversion in the case of the structures we have studied here. Even later, when students know that inversion is not possible in embedded questions and have a higher proficiency level, they will still tend to produce it, as did the students who produced sentences (3) and (4) and also do even more advanced learners when they cannot monitor their performance. In this sense, some both oral and written drilling practice, both at the time of presenting them for the first time as in later revisions of these constructions, might be convenient in order to help create a habit against that tendency towards inversion. Even if we do not subscribe to the view that learning a foreign language is a matter of developing habits to counteract L1 interference, there are some aspects of language production which benefit from this kind of practice once the learner has cognitively understood what is going on. We think that this may be one of them[9].

Our linguistic study here adds nothing new in terms of pedagogical consequences for the teaching of English indirect embedded questions but it did not set out to do that in the first place. However, it serves to back up the intuition many EFL teachers have always had, namely, the need for these structures to be taught explicitly to adult learners, making them aware of the obligatory nature of non-inversion in indirect embedded questions in MSE.

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Notes

[1] For example, in multiple choice test questions.

[2] Or AGReement, according to the Split Inflection hypothesis where Inflection splits into the two functional heads Tense and Agreement.

[3] Neither the split inflection nor the VP internal origin of the subject are reflected here.

[4] According to some authors in order to adjoin to their tense and agreement features precisely, which would be generated under I.

[5] This null C would be always non-verbal , in the sense that it does not allow a verb to be adjoined to it: cf. Kayne (1982).

[6] There has not been a thorough sampling of native speakers intuitions in this respect, only a sample of ten has been consulted, the author included among them. This makes sense for (6) if, according to Torrego (1984), the Wh-word drags the verb along or if, according to Pollock (1989), inversion results from verb movement while the subject remains in its original position within VP. In embedded questions the Wh-word moves to the specifier position (that occupied by the constituent which precedes the head) of the CP root at the front of the sentence passing through the embedded CPs' specifier position , which would also drag the embedded verb. This is represented here for two of the (numbered) examples from the text:

(2) [$_{IP}$ Quería saber [$_{CP}$ dónde$_i$ vivía$_j$ [$_{IP}$ Helen t$_j$ t$_i$]]]

(6) [$_{CP}$ Qué$_i$ (*tú) dijiste (tú) [$_{CP}$ t$_{i''}$ que [$_{CP}$ t$_{i'}$ trajo$_j$ [$_{IP}$ Pedro t$_j$ t$_i$ ayer]]]]?

(In Spanish, the possibility of selecting a CP including another is limited to predicates introducing indirect questions: cf. Bruckart 1989).

[7] As seems to be the case for Belfast English: cf. Henry (1995).

[8] In order to see if there is transfer it might be useful to see what happens with EFL students from other L1s or other varieties of Spanish (like Caribbean Spanish) which do not favour inversion in embedded questions.

[9] We will not discuss here if L2 learners ever get to change their underlying L2 grammatical specifications for language aspects like this related to the functional categories of the language. We believe they will not.