RiCL Research in Corpus Linguistics

Review of Fuchs, Robert and Valentin Werner. 2020. *Tense and Aspect in Second Language Acquisition and Learner Corpus Research.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins. ISBN: 978-9-027-20715-9. https://doi.org/10.1075/bct.108

Yukio Tono
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies / Japan

This edited collection has a special focus on corpus-based research into the acquisition of tense and aspect (TA) in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The acquisition of TA has been a key research topic in SLA for a long time, and there are a considerable number of publications in books (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig 2000), edited collections (e.g. Salaberry and Shirai 2002; Labeau and Saddour 2012; Howard and Leclercq 2017), journal special issues (e.g. McManus *et al.* 2017) as well as individual papers. Despite the number of previous studies, Fuchs and Werner, the editors of this volume, argue that "the community of learner corpus researchers has apparently been comparatively reluctant in tackling the issue of TA" (p.4). Describing the current situation of TA acquisition studies in SLA as "embarrassment of riches" (Slabakova 2002: 186), they claim that the findings of TA studies are still fragmented in nature and that corpus-based analyses are a timely way of contributing towards solving the overall TA puzzle, "whose pieces lie around while its meaning fails to emerge" (Ortega 2014: 177).

The book has six contributions originally submitted for a special issue of *International Journal of Learner Corpus Research* Volume 4, Number 2. The first chapter by Fuchs and Werner, entitled "Tense and aspect in Second Language Acquisition and learner corpus research" (pp. 1–22) sets the scene for corpus-based work in TA acquisition studies in SLA research. After showing the reasons for the persistent popularity of studying TA acquisition and use, they discuss basic definitions of tense and aspect by Comrie (1985) and the difficulties involved in acquiring TA systems in different languages, and the fragmented nature of the findings of TA-related studies. Then five

major theories ('Lexical Aspect Hypothesis', 'Discourse Hypothesis', 'Distributional Bias Hypothesis', 'Phonological Saliency Hypothesis', and 'Default Past Tense Hypothesis') are summarised with relevant explanatory variables, including frequency and transfer effects. Finally, the main points in the following chapters are previewed concerning the relevant variables and theories.

The chapter by Lea Meriläinen examines the progressive form and its function in spoken learner English (pp. 23–52). The author points out that the English progressive form (*be* +V*ing*) is "highly variable and broad in its semantic range, and even Advanced learners struggle with the appropriate use of this construction" (p. 23). Another challenging factor for acquiring the progressive is its undergoing change in present-day English. The study examines the frequencies and semantic functions of the progressive in the *Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage* (LINDSEI; Gilquin *et al.* 2010) to find out to what extent learners are adopting the ongoing changes, focusing on futurate and subjective uses of the progressive. The paper also addresses the issue of the ESL-EFL continuum. The effects of an exposure-rich learning environment (ESL-end) on the new uses of the progressive is investigated by comparing learners from countries where English is used in varying degrees outside formal educational contexts. It also examines intra-corpus variation between learners who have vs. have not spent time in English-speaking countries. The results reveal that exposure to English in the home country explains some of the variations in the progressive frequencies, but most of all it shows the extent to which the learners have adopted its new semantic uses. By contrast, staying in English-speaking countries was not an influential variable for all learner groups.

The chapter by Robert Fuchs and Valentin Werner investigates the use of stative progressives by school-age English learners and the importance of the variable context (pp. 53–82). They argue that

> given that research providing evidence of the use of the progressive in stative contexts typically focuses on proficient users or Advanced learners of English, one way to shed more light on the role of L1 influence is to study the use of the progressive by beginning and intermediate learners (p.58).

To this end, they use the *International Corpus of Crosslinguistic Interlanguage* (ICCI; Tono and Díez-Bedmar 2014). The analysis revealed rather limited evidence of L1 influence in that target-like stative progressives were used somewhat more frequently by

learners with an L1 that has a progressive. Overall, stative progressives, especially erroneous (i.e. non-target-like) uses, were rare, despite claims in the literature to the contrary. Apart from its theoretical relevance to the 'Aspect Hypothesis', the study also has pedagogical implications. The potential extension of the progressive to stative verbs was found to be a very rare phenomenon in beginning and early intermediate learners of English. Thus, it is suggested that this particular use of the progressive should not preoccupy teachers and creators of pedagogical materials, and that time and resources should instead be dedicated to more important usages.

The chapter by Paula Rautionaho and Sandra C. Deshors (pp. 83–110) conducts a multifactorial analysis of progressive marking contrasting native English (ENL; British English and American English) to two Asian Englishes (ESL; Indian and Singapore) and Dutch English (EFL). The corpora used for the analysis were the regional components of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE) project.[1] Using the stepwise search method of logistic regression, they modelled writers' constructional choices (progressive vs. non-progressive) across Englishes based on linguistic predictors such as Aktionsart categories by Vendler (1957), aspect (progresive vs. non-progresive), genre specified by ICE, seven semantic domains proposed by Biber *et al*. (1999), tense modality (modal, past, present), and voice (active, passive). The results show that semantic domains emerge as contextual features that influence writers' constructional choices regardless of their English variety and written genre. It was also found that although writers' constructional choices were uniform across ENL and ESL, EFL writers made choices that were different from writers of other variety types. Also, genre effects were stronger than variety effects. The findings support the inclusion of EFL data in studies on different kinds of Englishes. Although the ESL varieties did not differ from British English, Dutch English did (p. 106). They conclude that their results yield nuanced insights into the (dis)similarities among and within ESL/EFL varieties and contribute to the broader issue of the native-foreign-second language continuum across genres.

The chapter by Helen Zhao and Yasuhiro Shirai investigates the roles of lexical aspect and phonological saliency in second language acquisition of English past tense morphology (pp. 111–134). They also explore whether the effects of these factors were affected by data elicitation tasks and learners' L2 proficiency. A cloze task and a narrative task were administered to twenty Arabic EFL learners to examine the 'Aspect Hypothesis'

---

[1] http://ice-corpora.net/ice/index.html

(AH) and the 'Phonological Saliency Hypothesis' (PSH), and to investigate the possible interrelation between the theoretical constructs of the two hypotheses. With regard to the AH, their findings suggest that the results of both elicitation tasks reveal a stronger effect for lexical aspect than for phonological saliency. The PHS states that the past marking of irregular verbs is more perceptually salient than that of regular verbs. Thus, irregular verbs are predicted to be more consistently marked for tense than regular verbs. However, they only found a marginal effect on the accuracy of past marking in oral narratives. Arabic learners did not heavily rely on irregular verbs to mark past tense in narratives. The cloze test also failed to find a regularity effect. Zhao and Shirai conclude that

> [C]ompared to the strong effects of lexical aspect in the narrative and cloze data, phonological saliency on the basis of morphological regularity seems to be a less reliable predictor of Arabic learners' acquisition of English past tense morphology. (p.128)

The final chapter by Nicole Tracy-Ventura and Jhon A. Cuesta Medina (pp.135–158) investigates the distributional patterns of verb form frequencies in the Spanish past tense (the preterit and the imperfect) in two conversational registers of the *Corpus del Español* (Davies 2002). Following a usage-based approach, they examine the potential influence of input frequency as a driving factor in L2 learning. They focus on the following aspects of the distributional patterns of verb form frequencies: (i) the frequency and distribution of the hundred most frequent verbs in the past tense in a conversation corpus and their proportions of the preterit and the imperfect; (ii) the fifty most frequent verbs in the preterit and the imperfect, and whether their distributions are Zipfian; (iii) verbs associated most distinctively with the preterit or the imperfect and any evidence of a Zipfian distribution; and (iv) which meaning of the imperfect (continuous, habitual or progressive) is most frequent in Spanish conversations. The results support the existence of a distributional bias in L1 Spanish, with several telic predicates more often occurring in the preterit and several atelic predicates in the imperfect. The findings also demonstrated that the distribution of verbs in the preterit and the imperfect was Zipfian, with the most frequent verbs overall accounting for the majority of all the tokens. Finally, an analysis of the different meanings of the imperfect demonstrated clear differences in frequency of use with the continuous meaning as the most frequently expressed meaning, followed by habituality and progressivity. They conclude the chapter with the following remark:

Having an empirical description of what the input might be like for naturalistic learners provides valuable information that can be used to understand better the role of frequency in Second Language Acquisition, and the acquisition of tense and aspect in particular. (p.155)

This book provides an excellent overview of the current arguments over TA acquisition studies. The introductory chapter by Fuchs and Werner serves as an eminently readable summary of the related theories and issues of tense and aspect in SLA and the relevance of corpus approaches. Anybody who is not familiar with this area of research should read this chapter first. The summary of previous studies in SLA on the five principles/theories leads to a clear description of the potential gap to be filled by corpus-based studies, which is quite convincing and should enlighten the prospective readers. It also demonstrates how learner corpora can contribute to SLA in terms of several important methodological aspects, which include the use of multivariate analysis, the emphasis on usage-based approaches as a theoretical background, cross-linguistic influence, and Second Language (SL) and Foreign Language (FL) continuum, and the need of systematic compilation of beginning learners' corpora. These points appear many times throughout the chapters and form a coherent message showing the significance of corpus approaches to TA studies in SLA research.

Overall, this is an excellent collection of papers showing how corpus-based work can contribute to TA acquisition studies. Here I have several comments ready for some of the book's key issues. The central notions and hypotheses that have shaped the discussion of TA development and use have largely focused on the areas of lexical semantics, cognition, and linguistic context (p.5). I would argue that more close attention should be paid to the 'instructional effects'. In the late 1980s, I was involved in the government-funded project at a national university in Tokyo as a postgraduate student. It was a large-scale survey on English tense and aspect with approximately 15,000 secondary school and university students (Hatori *et al*. 1987). One of the most surprising findings in the project was that Japanese learners of English were found to make most errors in the use of the simple present. The errors of using present progressives or present perfect constructions instead of the simple present were so persistent. This was partly due to the way tense and aspect in English were taught in the classrooms. In Japanese lower secondary schools, the present tense was introduced at the very beginning stage of learning, and the basic verb patterns (e.g. verb + object + object, verb + *to* inf) were practiced using the present tense only for approximately the next ten months. Toward the

end of the first academic year, the present progressive form was introduced, followed by the past tense in the second year, and the perfective aspect in the third year. In EFL countries like Japan, this kind of 'instructional order effects' and 'frequency effects in terms of classroom exposure' are crucial factors determining the subsequent acquisition process. Very few SLA studies have taken into account these instructional effects as a predictor variable, partly due to the fact that most studies used either advanced learners with no clear background information of previous instructions or those who were in ESL contexts with ample opportunities for exposure. In this book, Fuchs and Werner point out the importance of investigating the acquisition process by beginning-level learners and "recent input received and/or usage by the learner" as important variables (recency and prototypicality, p.11). I think TA acquisition studies should deal with this issue more seriously.

Secondly, since many Japanese learners of English started with a so-called 'Default Present Tense Hypothesis', and their interlanguage process is to learn how to map the temporal meanings of past, present, and future forms, starting with the simple present. One of the reasons why very few SLA studies focused on the simple present is that most TA acquisition studies focused on something 'marked', like past tense morphology, and showed less interest in unmarked constructions. However, it should be noted that the acquisition of unmarked constructions could be equally problematical. It is a well-known fact that Interlanguage (IL) sometimes shows an inverted U-shaped curve in terms of observed errors. The initially simple IL system will undergo a change toward a more complex system as it is exposed to more and more complex usage patterns. As L2 learners are exposed to more marked constructions, those marked features temporarily override the formation of unmarked constructions. The simple present is often mixed up with the present progressive or the present perfect, which is especially the case for a group of beginning-level learners. This process is either hindered or facilitated by the cross-linguistic features of L1. Fuchs and Werner's study in this book reported that "stative progressives, especially erroneous (i.e. non-target-like) uses, were rare, in spite of claims in the literature to the contrary" (p.73). However, this observation could be misleading because they examined the erroneous use of marked constructions (in this case, stative progressive) only. They did not examine the uses of the simple present to see whether they should be replaced by stative progressives. The blurb in the back cover of this book raises a list of research questions, one of which is "How can the notion of 'target-like'

performance be operationalized for corpus material?" The issue raised here is closely related to this research question. I would argue that over/under-generalisation of the present tense should be investigated rigorously in combination with other constructions and in light of the notion of target-like performance.

While the AH has been so influential that it surely paved the way for this persistent popularity of studying this field, it should be pointed out that the AH deals with lexical aspect primarily and does not deal with grammatical aspect and tense morphology in a comprehensive way, which in my view has led the subsequent studies to the mere confirmation of AH in a restrictive manner. This is partly the reason for the impression that there are so many TA studies "whose pieces lie around while its meaning fails to emerge" (Ortega 2014: 177). This imperfection is partly because, in English, tense refers primarily to past and present time orientation only, and most studies do not deal with future time expressions in the analysis. It is true that the future tense is different from the past and present tense in the sense that it is not morphologically marked but supplied by auxiliary verbs in English. However, from learners' perspectives, using *will* for the future tense and *have* for the perfective aspect is the same surface structure operation. In both cases, learners need to make an additional lexical choice to map tense/aspect meanings to the target form. In pedagogical grammar, temporal expressions are always introduced by distinguishing past, present, and future first as "our experience as well as representation of time is based upon consciousness" (Hewson 1997: 2), and their associated forms are presented accordingly. Aspect in pedagogical grammar mainly refers to grammatical aspect, namely the perfect and the progressive (Biber *et al.* 1999: 460). In my view, the lack of attention to unmarked constructions and too much reliance on AH seems to make the whole picture in this area become blurred.

Finally, I have a few comments on some specific details in each study in this book. In Meriläinen's study, Japanese learners of English were classified as the same group as Polish, which is

> in the middle of the continuum in that they have access to written media and the Internet in English, but little exposure to spoken English nor the need to use it in international contexts (p. 30).

While it is true that written media and the Internet are available in English in Japan, a majority of Japanese people rarely use them. Most Japanese are engaged in social media interactions in Japanese only. Very little daily exposure to English is being made at home,

which is very different from Dutch learners, for example, who are exposed to English dramas and movies on TV from childhood. In Japan, almost all foreign dramas and movies are dubbed. These situations were clearly shown in the results of Meriläinen's analysis, where Japanese learners' performance was as poor as Chinese. We should note that the formal definition of the factors involving the ESL-EFL continuum (see Table 2 in her study) does not always apply straightforwardly to a given learning community.

In the study by Tracy-Ventura and Cuesta Medina, the Zipfian distribution was examined in the native speaker (NS) Spanish data. Zipf's law always applies if natural language data accumulates, so it seems not very meaningful to check the distribution against NS data, because it is almost always observed. Rather, a comparison should be made between NS and NNS data, where skewed, non-Zipfian distributions resulting from instructional effects mentioned above could lead to the learning of non-target-like patterns of use on learner performance. Last but not least, very few studies in the book refer to the important fact that many verbs have a strong association with either present or past tense. According to Biber *et al*. (1999: 459), verbs denoting mental and logical states occur over 80 per cent of the time in the present tense: *bet*, *doubt*, *know*, *matter*, *mean*, *mind*, *reckon*, *suppose*, *thank,* whereas the verbs strongly associated with past tense (80% in the past tense) describe human activities: *exclaim*, *eye*, *glance*, *grin*, *nod*, *pause*, *remark*, *reply*, *shrug*, *sigh*, *smile*, *whisper*. Another paradox related to aspect is that

> many previous accounts of the progressive aspect describe it as occurring freely with dynamic verbs, while verbs with stative senses have been described as not occurring in the progressive. However, it turns out that both dynamic and stative verbs are included among the most common verbs in the progressive and that both dynamic and stative verbs are included among the verbs that very rarely take the progressive (Biber *et al*. 1999: 472)

TA acquisition studies should take into account these types of corpus findings. I do hope that this edited collection serves as a foundation for knowing state-of-the-art theories with empirical studies and help those interested readers start tackling these unsolved problems in TA acquisition research by making the best use of corpus approaches.

REFERENCES

Bardovi-Harlig, Kathleen. 2000. *Tense and Aspect in Second Language Acquisition. Form, Meaning, and Use*. London: Blackwell.
Biber, Douglas, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad and Edward Finegan. 1999. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. London: Longman.

Comrie, Bernard. 1985. *Tense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davies, Mark. 2002. Un corpus anotado de 100.000.000 palabras del español histórico y moderno. *Sociedad Española para el Procesamiento del Lenguaje Natural* 29: 21–27.

Gilquin, Gaëtanelle, Sylvie De Cock and Sylviane Granger eds. 2010. *Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage*. Leuven: Presses Universitaires de Louvain.

Hatori, Hiroyoshi, Ito, Kaichi., Kanatani, Ken, Noda, Tetsuyu and Katayama, Namio. 1987. *Acquisition of English Tense and Aspect - In the case of Japanese Learners of English*. Tokyo Gakugei University Interlanguage Development Research Project Report No.1. Tokyo: Tokyo Gakugei University.

Hewson, John. 1997. Tense and aspect: Description and theory. In John Hewson and Vit Bubenik eds. *Tense and Aspect in Indo-European Languages: Theory, Typology and Diachrony*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1–23.

Howard, Martin and Pascale Leclercq. 2017. Tense, aspect and modality in Second Language Acquisition: An overview. In Martin Howard and Pascale Leclercq, eds. *Tense-Aspect-Modality in a Second Language. Contemporary Perspectives*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1–25.

Labeau, Emmanuelle and Inès Saddour eds. 2012. *Tense, Aspect, and Mood in First and Second Language Acquisition*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

McManus, Kevin, Norbert Vanek, Pascale Leclercq and Leah Roberts eds. 2017. *Tense, Aspect, and Modality in L2 (TAML2).* Special issue of the *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 55/3.

Ortega, Lourdes. 2014. Trying out theories on interlanguage: Description and explanation over 40 years of L2 negation research. In ZhaoHong Han and Elaine Tarone eds. *Interlanguage: 40 Years Later*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 173–201.

Salaberry, M. Rafael and Yasuhiro Shirai. 2002. L2 acquisition of tense-aspect morphology. In M. Rafael Salaberry and Yasuhiro Shirai eds. *The L2 Acquisition of Tense-Aspect Morphology*, 1–20. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Slabakova, Roumyana. 2002. Recent research on the acquisition of aspect: An embarrassment of riches? *Second Language Research* 18/2: 172–188.

Tono, Yukio and María Belén Díez-Bedmar. 2014. Focus on learner writing at the beginning and intermediate stages: The ICCI corpus. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 19/2: 163–177.

Vendler, Zeno. 1957. Verbs and times. *The Philosophical Review* 66/2: 143–160.

Reviewed by
Yukio Tono
Graduate School of Global Studies
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS)
3-11-1, Ashi-cho, Fuchu-city
Tokyo 183-8534
Japan
e-mail: y.tono@tufs.ac.jp