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On the L1 Attrition of the Spanish Present Tense

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Abstract: This study examines the potential native language (L1) attrition of the ongoing value of the Spanish present tense among long-term Spanish immigrants. Based on the assumption of second-language (L2) transfer and proposals on the permeability of interface-conditioned structures, it is hypothesized that long-term Spanish immigrants will show difficulty with the interpretation and use of the ongoing value of the Spanish simple present due to transfer from divergent semantic values in English (L2). Results from an acceptability judgment task, a truth value judgment task, and an elicited production task show low levels of acceptance and use of present-tense forms with an ongoing meaning by the immigrant group, as well as significantly higher use of the progressive form. It is argued that transfer from English selectional properties has reduced the range of lexical selection of the Spanish present, leading to a convergence toward the most restrictive L2 configuration.

Keywords: L1 attrition, Spanish present tense, syntax-semantics interface, tense and aspect morphology, transfer

1. Introduction

This study examines the native language (L1) attrition of the aspectual properties of the Spanish present tense, a syntax-semantic interface structure so far underexplored. Specifically, it investigates to what extent long-term Spanish immigrants have difficulties with the interpretation and use of the ongoing value of the Spanish present, not available in English, and if so, whether they can be described in terms of second-language (L2) transfer (e.g., Klein 1980; Sánchez-Muñoz 2004; Schwartz and Sprouse 1996). L1 attrition refers to the nonpathological erosion of previously acquired L1 properties (lexical, syntactic, semantic/pragmatic) due to intense contact with a dominant second language and reduced L1 input and use (e.g., Gürel 2004; Köpke and Schmid 2004; Montrul 2002; Schmid 2002; Seliger 1996; Silva-Corvalán 1991; Sorace 2004).

English and Spanish differ in their aspectual representations of the present tense with eventive predicates. In English, the present tense disallows an ongoing interpretation, as shown in (1a) below. For ongoing interpretations, the progressive (1c) must be used (e.g., Cowper 1998; Schmitt 2001). In Spanish, the present tense can be interpreted as ongoing or generic (habitual), as shown in (1b). The progressive (1d) also selects an ongoing meaning (e.g., Alarcos-Llorach 1994):

(1) a. (English) Rose plays tennis.	Ongoing ¹	Generic
b. (Spanish) Rosa juega al tenis.	right now#	tennis player√
c. (English) Rose is playing tennis.	right now√	tennis player√
d. (Spanish) Rosa está jugando al tenis.	right now√	tennis player#

The English present tense is then in a subset relationship with Spanish, allowing only a subset (+generic) of the two available sets (+generic, +ongoing). Moreover, in contrast to English, the

semantic values of the Spanish present are not necessarily distinguished by inflectional morphology (1b). If, as has been argued, L2-induced L1 attrition affects primarily areas of the grammar where the syntax interfaces with interpretable domains (discourse/pragmatics or semantics; e.g., Sorace 2000; Tsimpli, Sorace, Heycock, and Filiaci 2004), I predict that transfer of the semantic values of the English present (+states, –processes) will reduce the range of aspectual selection in Spanish L1 (+states, +processes). This may be evidenced by low levels of acceptance and production of the present tense with an ongoing meaning.

The study is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a descriptive analysis of English and Spanish aspectual differences in the present tense and the theoretical approach adopted in the study. Section 3 examines previous research on L1 attrition, followed by the study in Section 4. Results are presented in Section 5. Section 6 provides the discussion and conclusions.

2. The Spanish and English Present Tense

The Spanish present tense is the most flexible of all verbal forms of the Spanish language due to its broad spectrum of situational values (e.g., Alarcos-Llorach 1994). In addition to its common habitual or generic meanings, the Spanish present can also refer to a situation simultaneous to the speech act (e.g., *Ya llega la novia*, ‘The bride is coming in now’) or posterior to the speech act (e.g., *Ahora subo*, ‘I am coming up right now’) (e.g., Torres Cacoullós 2000). A sentence such as *Juan come frutas* (John eats fruit) is ambiguous in that it can be interpreted either as *Juan is eating fruit right now* (ongoing interpretation) or *Juan is a fruit eater* (generic interpretation) (e.g., Schmitt 2001). The Spanish present is also used to refer to past events (historical present; e.g., *Colón descubre América en 1492*, ‘Columbus discovers America in 1492’) and in reportive speech (reportive present; e.g., *Soriano entra ahora al partido*, ‘Soriano comes into the game now’).

In contrast to the simple present, the present progressive is most commonly used to refer to ongoing events that occur simultaneously with the speech act (e.g., Cortés-Torres 2005; Klein 1980). However, it can also refer to habitual events when restricted to a specific period (e.g., *Miguel está fumando demasiado*, ‘Michael is smoking too much (lately)’) or with an iterative meaning (e.g., *Está lloviendo mucho en estos días*, ‘It’s raining a lot these days’). The generic reading with the progressive is preferable with certain predicate types but is becoming quite acceptable with a wider selection of verbs in Spanish. Moreover, an immediate future reading is also available (e.g., *Estamos alcanzando la meta*, ‘We are reaching the goal’; e.g., Yllera 1999). The use of the progressive in Spanish, then, parallels the simple present in that they can both refer to an ongoing event simultaneous to the speech act.

The English present tense has four main aspectual interpretations: habitual, generic, futurate, and historical (e.g., Cowper 1998). However, in contrast with Spanish, an ongoing meaning is not allowed (examples adapted from Cowper 1998):

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| (2) a. John runs every day. | (habitual) |
| b. Bats fly at night. | (generic) |
| c. The <i>Maple Leafs</i> play tomorrow. | (futate) |
| d. Trudeau signs the Charter in 1982. | (historical) |

In (2a–2d) the eventuality expressed by the verb extends over a period of time. In (2a) the use of the present indicates an activity that occurs habitually. In (2b) the present indicates a generic fact concerning bats. In (2c) the present has a future value, and in (2d) the present is used to refer to a past event. In all of these examples, the use of the simple present refers to a situation that is occurring simultaneous to the moment of speech. In order to express an eventuality simultaneous with the moment of speech, the present progressive tense must be used. Thus, in English, the distinction between progressive (ongoing) and nonprogressive meanings must

be expressed by a progressive form (gerund) or by a nonprogressive form (simple present), respectively. Two exceptions to this rule are the use of the present tense as a performative act or as reportive speech (simultaneous report of an ongoing event) common in sports events. The notion of progressiveness is arguably interrelated with predicate type. Within this perspective, stative verbs or those referring to inert perception (e.g., *hear*) do not have a progressive form due to their internal stativity meaning. However, Comrie (1976) argues that in English there are lexically stative verbs that can be treated as nonstative depending on their specific meaning within the sentence, as in *I am being silly*. The use of the progressive with a stative verb can also imply a temporary state versus a more permanent state (e.g., Slabakova 2003).

In sum, English and Spanish present tense differ mainly because in English an ongoing interpretation is not allowed and the present progressive must be used. In contrast, in Spanish the present usually allows an ongoing interpretation with the exception of some varieties (e.g., Argentinean Spanish). Table 1 below summarizes these main aspectual differences.

Table 1. Summary of Aspectual Differences in English and Spanish

Aspectual Interpretations		Spanish	English
Present	[+ongoing]	<i>María canta en la ducha.</i>	∅
	[+generic]	<i>María canta en la ducha.</i>	Mary sings in the shower.
Progressive	[+ongoing]	<i>María está cantando.</i>	Mary is singing.

These are the aspectual differences examined in the present study. I argue that transfer from English aspectual values (+generic, –ongoing) will lead to a narrowing in the range of aspectual options in Spanish (+generic, +ongoing). To develop this argument, I adopt De Swart's (1998) selectional approach of aspectual variation, which I discuss in the following section.

2.1 A Selectional Approach to Aspectual Variation

In her analysis of the preterit versus imperfect aspectual differences in English, French, and other Romance languages, De Swart (1998) argues that aspectual variation among languages is determined by the semantic patterns that tense morphemes (e.g., preterit, imperfect) select in semantic composition with other parts of the sentence, including adverbs. Within this perspective, the semantic properties of a tense head in any particular language are correlated with the particular semantic features that tense morphemes carry (subcategorization frames).

Schmitt (2001) extends De Swart's proposal to the study of the present tense and argues that languages like Spanish, Portuguese, and English select different types of semantic interpretations with activity verbs (e.g., 'to run'). Present-tense forms in Spanish can select either states (habitual) or processes (ongoing) interpretations, whereas present-tense forms in English select only states (e.g., Schmitt 2001). Schmitt proposes that since in English the present tense selects only habitual semantic representations, when it combines with an activity verb like *to run*, the inherent process meaning of the verb is coerced into a state, and the resulting semantic interpretation is that of a habitual event, as in *John eats apples*. In contrast, Spanish present-tense forms can naturally combine with processes, and therefore ongoing and habitual interpretations are available.

This selectional perspective offers a more convincing explanation as it does not link aspectual variation to predetermined morphological paradigms (Giorgi and Pianesi 1997). It thus

accounts for aspectual differences among languages with similar morphological representations (e.g., Spanish and Portuguese). Moreover, this proposal allows a transfer-based explanation for the L1 attrition of previously developed aspectual properties due to contact with dominant L2 options. For instance, if there is transfer from English to Spanish, long-term Spanish immigrants may activate incorrect selectional patterns due to transfer of reduced selectional properties in English (+states, –processes), leading to a contraction in the range of their L1 aspectual selection (+states, +processes). That is, the Spanish immigrants may no longer allow simple present forms to combine naturally with processes but instead coerce processes such as “run” into states. In that case, they would process sentences like *Juan corre por el parque* (John runs/is running in the park) as inherently habitual and would no longer assign a possible ongoing (process) interpretation. A process interpretation would then be combined with progressive forms, as in English. These predictions are in line with previous research in L1 attrition that documents significant transfer effects among bilingual speakers (e.g., Montrul 2002; Silva-Corvalán 1991; Sorace 2000). The following section reviews some of this research and outlines the specific hypotheses for the present study.

3. Previous L1 Attrition Research

3.1 The Role of Transfer and Vulnerable Domains

Weinreich (1953) defines transfer as “those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language.” (1). Previous research on transfer within a generative grammar framework has long documented transfer effects in the L2 acquisition of most linguistic properties (e.g., Jarvis and Pavlenko 2008; Licerias 1986; Schwartz and Sprouse 1996; White 1987). According to full transfer models, L2 learners initially transfer their full L1 linguistic representation. That is, the final state of L1 acquisition constitutes the L2 initial state (e.g., Schwartz and Sprouse 1996).

More recently, some researchers have proposed that L2-induced L1 attrition is selective as it primarily affects areas where the syntax interfaces with pragmatics and discourse factors (syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface) while leaving the syntax proper untouched (e.g., Sorace 2000, 2005; Tsimpili et al. 2004). Specifically, Sorace has argued that syntax-pragmatic interface structures are more complex than narrow syntax and they are therefore more vulnerable to language transfer, leading to L1 residual optionality (divergence from the target grammar) among L2 learners or emerging optionality among adult immigrants. Following generative theory, this perspective differentiates morphosyntactic features as *interpretable* (those contributing to meaning like tense and aspect) or *uninterpretable* (purely syntactic features like agreement features). Interpretable features are checked at the syntax-pragmatic/discourse interface level, whereas uninterpretable features are checked at the level of the computational-syntactic system (e.g., Platzack 1996, 2001).

Sorace (2000) examined and compared the L2 acquisition and L1 attrition of the distribution of overt subject pronouns and postverbal subjects among Italian near-native speakers of English and English near-native speakers of Italian. In contrast with English (a non-pro-drop language), in Italian or Spanish (pro-drop languages) preverbal subjects can be omitted due to the phonological realization of agreement features on the verb (uninterpretable features) (e.g., Belletti, Bennati, and Sorace 2007). Postverbal subjects are also possible in Italian and Spanish due to the null subject value of the parameter. Sorace hypothesized that the production of null subjects in Italian would not be vulnerable to attrition since it is under the specification of noninterpretable features (those relevant to morphosyntax) but that their distribution would since it is determined by interpretable features (those relevant to meaning; 722).

Sorace found that English-speaking L2 learners of Italian demonstrated an overgeneralization of Italian overt pronouns in contexts where monolingual Italian speakers would use the null

option. Moreover, their results were similar to those of Italian near-native speakers of English undergoing L1 attrition. As predicted, both groups produced preverbal subjects optionally in contexts where a monolingual speaker would use the postverbal option. However, the Italian native grammar remained null subject, and the English native grammar remained overt subject. Only the distribution of overt pronominal subjects (syntax-discourse interface condition) was affected. The author concluded that interpretable features, which characterize the syntax-discourse/pragmatic interface, are optionally unspecified in L2 attainment and L1 attrition.

Similar results were observed in Tsimpli et al. (2004). The authors examined the L1 attrition of the production and interpretation of overt preverbal and postverbal subjects among Greek and Italian near-native speakers of English (L2). In contrast to English, Greek and Italian are pro-drop languages. However, in cases where discourse factors in Italian or Greek require the topicalization and focusing of the subject, it must be overt. Results showed attrition in the distribution and interpretation of overt preverbal subjects in Italian and Greek, which are regulated by interpretable features. These features became unspecified due to lack of similar interpretable features in the L2 (English). As in Sorace's (2000) study, participants showed an overproduction of overt preverbal subjects in contexts where monolinguals would use the null option. Moreover, participants optionally assigned a topic or focus reading under the influence of preverbal subjects in the L2 (English). However, there was no attrition of the uninterpretable features of subjects. Both Italian and Greek remain null subject languages, and English remains overt subject. There was also no attrition in the use of postverbal subjects, given that this is a syntactic option not shared by English.

Although Sorace and colleagues do not make direct predictions on transfer selectivity at the syntax-semantics interface, the area of analysis in this study, they do assume permeability of interpretable features at the logical form interface: ". . . syntactic attrition primarily affects morphosyntactic features that are interpretable at the logical form interface but leaves unaffected uninterpretable features that regulate parametric syntax" (Tsimpli et al. 2004: 263). Therefore, I would expect adult immigrants to show L2-induced L1 attrition at the syntax-semantics interface level as well, as has been documented by previous research on the L1 attrition of tense and aspect (e.g., Klein 1980; Montrul 2002; Silva-Corvalán 1994).

Research on verbal aspect documents L2 transfer effects in the comprehension and production of preterit versus imperfect distinctions among Spanish-English bilinguals (e.g., Montrul 2002; Silva-Corvalán 1991, 2003). Montrul (2002) examined the incomplete acquisition and L1 attrition of morphosemantic aspectual properties among Spanish bilinguals in the United States. Specifically, the author evaluated if the attrition of morphology also entails the loss of semantic features and if there are systematic patterns of incompleteness in the production and interpretation of aspectual distinctions. Participants were divided into three groups determined by the age at onset of bilingualism: (1) simultaneous bilinguals born in the United States, (2) early child L2 learners, and (3) a Latin American-born group of child late L2 learners. There was also a monolingual group ($n = 20$). Montrul found significant differences between the bilingual and monolingual groups, with age at onset of acquisition as the main predictive factor of the degree of divergence. Simultaneous bilinguals and early child L2 learners differed significantly from the monolinguals in the use of achievement predicates in the imperfect (3) and stative verbs in the preterit that shift aspectual class (4):

- (3) Juan **alcanzaba** la cima cuando una ráfaga de viento se lo impidió.
John reached-IMP the top when a gust of wind self him prevented
"John was reaching the top when a gust of wind prevented him from doing so."
- (4) Juan **sabía/supo** la verdad.
Juan knew-IMP/PRET the truth
"Juan knew/found out the truth."

Montrul concluded that both morphophonological spell-outs and semantic features are affected by incomplete acquisition in the case of simultaneous and early bilinguals and L1 attrition in the case of the Latin American-born group. Participants confused morphological forms and neutralized the semantic differences between the preterit and imperfect.

In a similar study, Silva-Corvalán (2003) examined patterns of aspectual simplification among adult bilinguals and bilingual children (ages 5;1 to 5;11). The author found direct association of the Spanish preterit with the English simple past and overextension of the preterit to contexts where the imperfect should be used:

- (5) *En la casa, mi mamá era la única que **habló** español . . .
 In the home, my mom was the only that spoke-PRET Spanish
 “At home, my mom was the only one who spoke Spanish.”

In (5), the speaker uses the preterit (*habló* ‘spoke’) instead of the imperfect (*hablaba* ‘spoke’). Silva-Corvalán concluded that the simplification observed among the participants was the result of incomplete acquisition at the ages of 3;0 and 5;0 rather than L1 attrition of previously acquired knowledge.

Regarding the L1 attrition of the Spanish present tense, Klein (1980) examined the role of L2 transfer (English) in the frequency of use of the simple present and the present progressive among nineteen Spanish-English bilinguals in New York City. Eleven speakers were either born in the United States or immigrated before the age of eight, and the other eight speakers were monolingual Spanish immigrants who arrived in the United States after the age of sixteen (control group). Results from a free conversation task and a picture description task demonstrated significant L2 convergence patterns among the bilingual group (Puerto Ricans), represented in higher frequency of use of the Spanish progressive and a correspondingly lower frequency of use of the simple present.

Similar results were found by Sánchez-Muñoz (2004) in a study of the role of transfer from English in the use of the Spanish progressive form and the simple present among Spanish immigrants in Los Angeles. Following Silva-Corvalán’s (1994) notion of generality, which predicts generalization of wider, less restricted forms, the author predicted transfer from English to affect the relative frequency of *estar* + *-ndo* forms and simple present forms with an ongoing meaning in Spanish. Results from a picture description task and a fill-in-the-gap questionnaire conducted among fourteen bilingual speakers indicated significant differences when compared to the control monolingual groups. Bilingual speakers showed a significantly higher level of use of the present progressive (90%) in contexts where English only allows the progressive form but Spanish also allows the simple present. The author concluded that these results indicate contact-induced convergence with English in the simplification of the present progressive to the detriment of the simple present in Spanish.

Contrary to Klein and Sánchez-Muñoz’s findings, Torres Cacoullós (2000) found neither patterns of convergence with English nor increased frequency in the use of the progressive form among bilingual speakers from New Mexico when compared to monolingual Mexican varieties. The author argued that the purported changes in the frequency of *estar* + *-ndo* constructions among Spanish-English bilinguals do not stem from language contact; on the contrary, they are the result of a grammaticalization process of this construction that is also taking place within the monolingual oral and informal norms. Although this may be the case, it is also possible that intense and prolonged contact with English patterns (morphological, semantic-pragmatic) may accelerate a process already present in the monolingual Spanish norm and act as a “trigger effect” (e.g., Silva-Corvalán 1994). Thus, both bilingualism and grammaticalization effects may in fact play a role in the overuse of the progressive form in lieu of the simple present.

3.2 Hypotheses

Building on the assumption of transfer (e.g., Schwartz and Sprouse 1996) and previous research on interface vulnerability, this study investigates the L1 attrition of the ongoing value of the Spanish present tense. In contrast with studies by Klein and Torres Cacoullos, which investigated the oral production of the progressive form in the informal norm, this study examines the written interpretation, listening comprehension, and oral production of both present and progressive forms among educated long-term immigrants.

As discussed in Section 2, the aspectual selectional properties of the Spanish present tense are inherently ambiguous (ongoing or generic). English, on the other hand, is more specific as there is a direct correlation between each morphological form (simple present or progressive) and its corresponding aspectual selectional values. As Klein (1980) argues, it is safe to assume that English has a less complex configuration than Spanish, specifying unambiguously each semantic value to the exclusion of the other. In a situation of intense contact with English, I would expect a process of competition in which the less complex grammar (English) overrules the more complex one (Spanish), leading to a reduction in the range of L1 options and convergence toward the most restrictive or narrow grammatical configuration (e.g., Silva-Corvalán 1994; Zapata, Sánchez, and Toribio 2005). Specifically, I predict Spanish long-term immigrants to activate incorrect aspectual patterns due to divergent selectional properties in English. They may transfer the selectional properties of the English present (+states), leading to a narrowing or contraction of the range of aspectual selection in Spanish (+states, +processes). This will be evidenced in low levels of acceptance and use of the present tense with an ongoing meaning. Moreover, I would not expect long-term immigrants to show difficulties with the generic interpretation of the present tense or with the ongoing value of the progressive, since these interpretations are fully available in both English and Spanish. Specifically, I hypothesize the following:

1. Long-term Spanish immigrants will show low levels of acceptance and use of the ongoing interpretation of the Spanish present due to transfer from English selectional values (+states, -processes).
2. Long-term Spanish immigrants will not show difficulties with the ongoing value of the progressive or the generic interpretation of the present, since these aspectual representations are both available in English.

4. The Study

4.1 Participants

Nineteen long-term Spanish immigrants (immigrant group) and twenty bilingual and monolingual speakers serving as a control group participated in the study. All participants completed a linguistic background questionnaire to determine the age of onset of bilingualism, length of residence in the United States, parents' L1, languages used at home and work, level of education, and the languages they felt more comfortable using.

The immigrant group consisted of educated Caribbean Spanish speakers who immigrated to the United States or Canada during early adulthood (mean age at onset of bilingualism was 16;5). The average age at time of testing was forty-four years old, and their mean length of residence was twenty-seven years. Participants were originally from Cuba ($n = 12$), Dominican Republic ($n = 6$), and Venezuela ($n = 1$). Fifteen participants resided in Union City, New Jersey, and four in Toronto, Canada. The selection criteria included dialectal region (Caribbean Spanish), age at onset of L2 acquisition (fourteen years old or older), and length of residence in the L2 context (a minimum of ten years).

Only Spanish Caribbean speakers were selected in order to exclude any possible dialectal differences in the use of the present tense or the progressive. Age of onset of L2 acquisition was equated with the age at the time of immigration. It was controlled for in order to test only L2 learners who immigrated to the L2 context with a fully developed grammar. A minimum of ten years of residence in the L2 context was a criterion because this length of stay is argued to be a reasonable time after which attrition usually emerges (Gürel 2004). Advanced L2 proficiency in English was determined based on the sociolinguistic profile of the participants, following previous research (e.g., Jia 1998), and their own assessment of their English skills.

Sociolinguistic factors considered included early age of onset of bilingualism, more than twenty years of residence in the United States/Canada, college education in English, occupation, and place of residence (New Jersey and Toronto). The participants worked or studied in environments where high proficiency in English was a requirement (high school teachers, librarians, nurses, lawyers, students, customer service/retail, university students).

During the interview process, the participants demonstrated excellent proficiency in English, and 74% (14/19) indicated that they felt equally comfortable in both English and Spanish. Their Spanish proficiency was native-like, evidenced during the oral production task and during the face-to-face interview with the investigator (a native speaker of Spanish). Regarding language use, most participants indicated they use both English and Spanish at work and home (58% and 53%, respectively).

The control group consisted of a total of twenty educated speakers (ten monolinguals and ten bilinguals) residing in Canada and Cuba. They were originally from Cuba ($n = 15$), Cartagena de India, Colombia ($n = 3$), and Venezuela ($n = 2$). The group included students, engineers, office clerks, and customer service agents. Their average age at time of testing was thirty-three years old. Bilingual speakers residing in Canada were included in the control group for practicality reasons. Their mean length of residence in Canada was one year and four months. Two of the participants had majored in English in Cuba, and two others studied it intensively at the university level before arrival in Canada. Due to the short length of residence of the bilingual speakers in Canada, no significant differences were expected between them and the monolingual participants.

4.2 Structures under Analysis and Elicitation Tasks

Four linguistic structures were tested: (1) the present tense with an ongoing interpretation, (2) the present tense with a generic interpretation, (3) the present progressive with an ongoing interpretation, and (4) the present progressive with a generic interpretation. Each linguistic structure had five test tokens for a total of twenty test items. Although the progressive is not logical with a generic interpretation, in both English and Spanish it can be coerced into a habitual situation if interpreted as an event that has been occurring recently. Table 2 summarizes these aspectual conditions and provides an example of each condition tested.

I expected transfer from the [+state] aspectual value of the English present to decrease the acceptability of present-tense forms in Spanish with an ongoing interpretation. In contrast with previous studies that limit their analysis primarily to oral production (e.g., Klein 1980; Torres Cacoullos 2000), the present study implemented three different tasks measuring the interpretation, comprehension, and production of present and progressive forms. The tasks included an acceptability judgment task (AJT; written comprehension; e.g., Dekydtspotter, Sprouse, and Anderson 1997), a listening truth value judgment task (TVJT; listening comprehension; e.g., Crain and Thornton 1998), and an elicited production task (EP; oral production; e.g., Montrul 2002). This methodology adds to previous L1 attrition research in that it provides a more comprehensive analysis of the bilingual speaker's performance regarding the ongoing value of the present tense.

Table 2.
Summary of Aspectual Conditions Testing the Ongoing
Value of the Present Tense: Tense by Situation Type

Present Tense		
Ongoing interpretation	<i>Juan corre en este momento.</i>	[PRES √]
Generic interpretation	"John is running right now." <i>Manuel camina al trabajo.</i>	[PRES √]
	"Manuel walks to work."	
Progressive Tense		
Ongoing interpretation	<i>Miguel está esquiando.</i>	[PROG √]
Generic interpretation	"Miguel is skiing." <i>Mi amiga Sara está bailando.</i>	[PROG #]
	"My friend Sara is dancing."	

The AJT comprised a total of forty items: twenty test items (five tokens per condition) and twenty distracters. This was a paper-and-pencil task, and the sentences were counterbalanced across participants. Participants were required to judge the acceptability of the test sentences on a five-point Likert scale in the context of a specific preceding scenario. The preceding scenarios provided a context for the test sentences, and they were given in English in order to avoid any priming effect. Participants were instructed to (1) read the given context carefully, (2) read the test sentence in Spanish, and (3) indicate the level of acceptability of the sentence on a scale from -2 to 2, as shown below:

- (6) *Giselle is very happy today and she has started to sing her favorite song.*
- a. Giselle **canta** su canción preferida en estos momentos. [pres. ong.]
 Giselle sings-PRES her song favorite right now
 "Giselle is singing her favorite song right now."
 -2 (odd) -1 (slightly odd) 0 (I don't know) 1 (more or less fine) 2 (perfectly fine)
- b. Giselle **está cantando** su canción preferida en estos momentos. [prog. ong.]
 Giselle is singing-PROG her song favorite right now
 "Giselle is singing her favorite song right now."
 -2 (odd) -1 (slightly odd) 0 (I don't know) 1 (more or less fine) 2 (perfectly fine)

In (6) the preceding scenario supported an ongoing situation, and thus the simple present (6a) or the progressive (6b) was acceptable. The ten verb types tested were *jugar* (to play), *correr* (to run), *mirar* (to watch), *bailar* (to dance), *tomar* (to drink), *caminar* (to walk), *esquiar* (to ski), *pintar* (to paint), *cantar* (to sing), and *ayudar* (to help). These ten activity verbs were counterbalanced across participants. Half of the participants judged five simple present forms (e.g., *juega* 'plays') in ongoing contexts and five progressive forms (e.g., *caminando* 'walking') in ongoing contexts. The other half were given the opposite forms (e.g., *camina* 'walks' and *jugando* 'playing') in present ongoing and progressive ongoing contexts, respectively. The TVJT also followed this design.

The TVJT task evaluated whether the participants would judge the present tense within an ongoing context as true. This was a listening comprehension task, and it was conducted using

the Praat program. In contrast with the AJT, participants were required to give a categorical measure. They listened to the preceding scenario first and then the test sentence. After listening to the test sentence, participants clicked “yes” if the sentence was true to the context or “no” if false:

(7) *Miguel does not like to run. However, today it's a nice sunny day and he has started to run around the park.*

Miguel corre por el parque.	<u>Yes</u>	No [pres. ong]
Miguel runs-PRES for the park.		
“Miguel is running around the park.”		

In (7) the preceding scenario supports an ongoing interpretation, and thus both the simple present and the progressive should elicit a “yes” answer. However, if the speakers are transferring from English, the simple present would elicit a “no” answer since the English present tense does not allow an ongoing meaning. As in the AJT, the preceding scenario was given in English to avoid any priming effect.

The elicited production task consisted of an oral narration of the story *Frog Goes to Dinner*. This story is about a boy and his pet frog. The pet frog sneaks into the boy’s coat pocket on the way to a fancy restaurant. At the restaurant the frog causes serious havoc, and the boy and his family are asked to leave. Participants were provided with wordless black-and-white images of the story and were asked to narrate it using the simple present. This method is advantageous as there is less monitoring of language form, so participants rely less heavily on their metalinguistic knowledge (e.g., Liskin-Gasparro 2000). The specific goal of the task was to evaluate the production of the present tense with an ongoing interpretation. I predicted adult immigrants would show low levels of present tense use with an ongoing interpretation.

5. Results

5.1 Acceptability Judgment Task

This task examined the interpretation of the ongoing value of the present tense in Spanish. Results showed low levels of acceptance of the ongoing value of the present tense, as predicted. However, participants did not show difficulties with the ongoing value of the progressive or with the habitual value of the present, since these two interpretations are available in both English and Spanish. The proportions of responses were submitted to an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures, with tense (present and progressive) and situation or context type (ongoing, generic) as within-subjects factors and group (immigrants and control) as the between-subjects factors. ANOVA results revealed no significant main effects per group ($F[1, 37] = .122, p = .729$). The interaction between tense and situation type was significant ($F[3, 37] = 97.50, p < .001$). This interaction is due to the fact that the present ongoing condition and the progressive generic condition were treated differently from the present generic and the progressive ongoing conditions, where all participants showed high levels of acceptance.

Overall significant differences between the immigrants and the controls were not predicted, since only the present ongoing condition was expected to be vulnerable to transfer. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to identify whether significant differences existed between groups in the present ongoing condition (the condition under examination). Results revealed significant differences between the groups ($t(37) = -4.444, p < .001$). This shows that both groups behaved significantly differently from each other. In order to examine whether the test participants also show difficulty at the individual level on this condition, an individual analysis was conducted.

In this task “odd” and “slightly odd” sentences were assigned a score of -2 and -1 , respectively, and “fine” and “perfectly fine” sentences were assigned a score of 1 and 2 . An “I

don't know" response was given a score of 0. To calculate individual results, four out of five (80%) accepted answers ("fine" or "perfectly fine") represented the cutoff point for speakers with acceptance behavior. Three out of five (60%) accepted answers represented the cutoff point for speakers with chance behavior, and two out of five (40%) represented the cutoff point for speakers with rejection behavior. Figure 1 and Table 3 display these results.

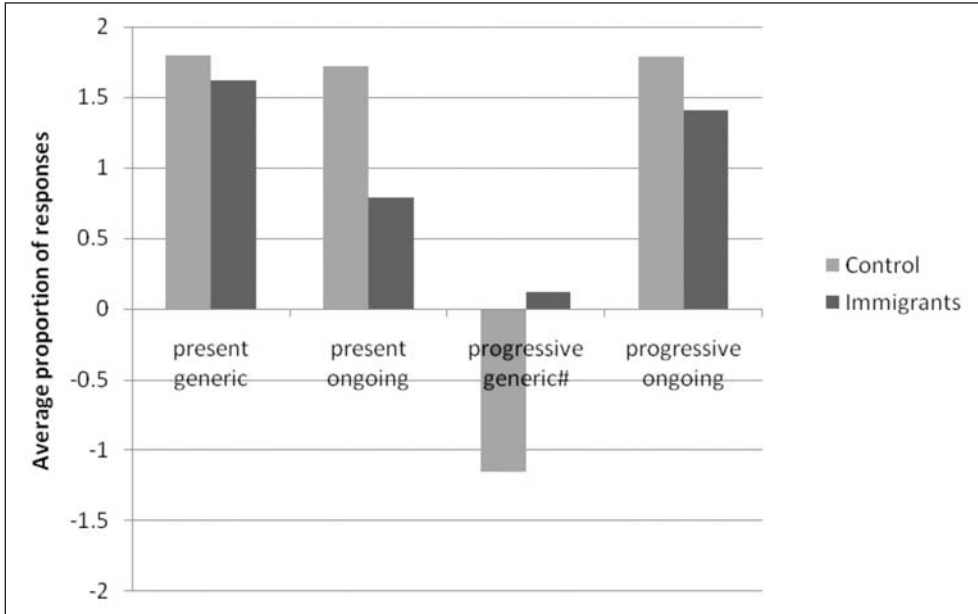


Figure 1. Acceptability Judgment Task. Mean Scores for Present and Progressive Tense by Ongoing and Generic Situation Type per Group

Table 3.
Acceptability Judgment Task. Individual Results per Group for Present Ongoing Condition

Group	Acceptance	Chance	Rejection
Immigrant	53% (10/19)	21% (4/19)	26% (5/19)
Control	95% (19/20)	0% (0/20)	5% (1/20)

Individual results confirmed group results showing low levels of acceptance of the ongoing value of the present tense by the immigrant group, confirming hypothesis (1). These results also showed a direct correlation between language use and level of L1 attrition. The speakers with rejection behavior shared a similar linguistic background that clearly differentiated them from the other immigrants. They arrived in the United States at age 14, they received high school and university education in English, and they used only English at work. The speakers with chance behavior, however, also shared the same characteristics of the speakers with rejection behavior, but they spoke both English and Spanish at work. Most of the speakers with acceptance behavior, on the other hand, used both English and Spanish at work and only Spanish at home, in contrast to the rejection or the chance behavior participants. Thus, the social context, *familism*, and language use appear to be a significant factor in the L1 attrition process and the degree of

L1 linguistic permeability among Spanish adult bilinguals in contact with English (e.g., Jaspaert and Kroon 1989; Thomason and Kaufman 1998). Individual results did not show significant differences between the bilingual and the monolingual control participants, as expected.

5.2 Truth Value Judgment Task

Like the AJT, the immigrants showed lower levels of accuracy in the interpretation of the present tense with an ongoing meaning when compared to the control participants. Results also demonstrated no difficulties with the ongoing meaning of the progressive, as predicted, but participants did show low levels of performance with the generic meaning of the present.

The average proportions of responses were submitted to an ANOVA analysis with repeated measures, with tense (present and progressive) and situation type (ongoing, generic) as within-subjects factors and group as the between-subjects factor. Overall ANOVA results revealed no significant main effects per group ($F(1, 37) = 2.005, p = .165$). The interaction between tense and predicate type was significant ($F(1, 37) = 42.468, p < .001$). As explained before, this interaction may be a result of participants' low levels of accuracy in the present generic condition and the progressive generic condition. Figure 2 displays these results.

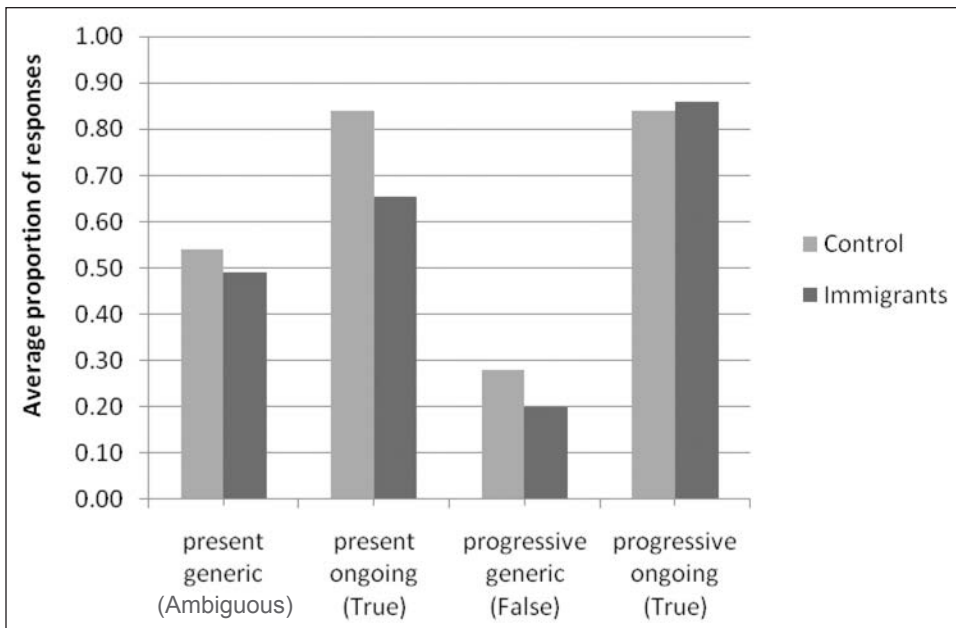


Figure 2. Truth Value Judgment Task. Mean Scores for Present and Progressive Tense by Ongoing and Generic Situation Type per Group

It is not surprising that overall ANOVA results revealed no significant differences between groups since English and Spanish only differ in the ongoing value of the present tense, the condition under analysis. To measure the obtained differences between groups per present ongoing condition, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted. Results showed significant differences between the immigrants and control ($t(37) = -2.280, p = .028$). As with the AJT, the immigrants showed lower levels of accuracy with the ongoing value of the present.

To find out whether participants showed difficulties at the individual level with the present ongoing condition, I conducted an individual analysis. In this task, “yes” answers were given

Thirty-nine narratives were transcribed (nineteen for the immigrant group and twenty for the control group). Only eventive finite verbs were included in the analysis. Stative verbs (e.g., *ser* ‘to be’, *gustar* ‘to like’), imperative forms, present subjunctive forms, and all nonfinite forms were excluded. Stative verbs were excluded because they usually cannot take a progressive form in either Spanish or English nor can the imperative or simple subjunctive forms. Nonfinite verbs were also excluded since they are not marked for aspect and thus were not relevant to the analysis. Another exclusion was the verb *ir* (to go) because this verb is normally used in the present form in Spanish and the progressive construction is odd. Following previous research (e.g., López-Ortega 2000), fixed verbal phrases functioning as discourse markers (e.g., *Aquí se ve que . . .* ‘Here we can see that . . .’) were also excluded. The total count of all eventive and finite verbs was classified according to tense (present, progressive, and “other”) and situation type (generic or ongoing). The tense classification “other” included four subdivisions: past tense (preterit imperfect), present perfect, past progressive, and periphrastic future constructions. The total number of all eventive verbs were calculated individually and then pooled by group.

To evaluate the production of the present tense with an ongoing interpretation, I measured the individual proportion of present-tense forms selected per ongoing statements. Ongoing statements referred to contexts where the speaker’s communicative intent in the context of the narrative was that of describing an ongoing, nongeneric event. Results showed high levels of production of present-tense forms by the control group (65%). Immigrants, on the other hand, showed lower levels of present tense use (42%), as predicted. Table 5 presents these results.

Table 5.
Average Proportion per Speaker per Group of Present,
Progressive, and Past Tenses Selected per Ongoing Statements

Group	Acceptance	Chance	Rejection
Immigrant	42% (397/924)	28% (261/924)	20% (180/924)
Control	65% (591/930)	19% (188/930)	7% (55/930)

As expected, the immigrants showed lower levels of present tense use and a corresponding higher production of progressive forms. An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to find out whether the groups behaved significantly differently in the use of the present. Results revealed significant differences between the two groups ($t(37) = -3.797, p < .001$). The immigrants used the present tense significantly less than the control participants. This indicates that the immigrants are performing differently from the controls, probably due to transfer effects from English wherein the present tense does not select for an ongoing interpretation.

Individual results also showed lower levels of present tense use at the individual level, ranging from 5% to 60%. The participants that showed rejection behavior in the AJT and the TVJT showed chance behavior, with an average proportion of present tense use of 44%. To examine whether there were significant differences in the use of the progressive, an independent samples *t*-test was also conducted on the proportion of progressive tense selected per ongoing statements. Results showed significant differences between the two groups ($t(37) = 2.032, p = .049$). The immigrants used the progressive tense in lieu of the simple present significantly more than the controls, corroborating previous findings (e.g., Klein 1980; Sánchez-Muñoz 2004).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined the L1 attrition of the ongoing value of the Spanish present tense among long-term Spanish immigrants in contact with English (L2). Under the assumption of

transfer (e.g., Pavlenko 2004) and current proposals on the vulnerability of interface related properties (e.g., Sorace 2005), it was hypothesized that long-term immigrants would show low levels of acceptance and use of the ongoing value of the present due to divergent aspectual selectional properties in English. As predicted, group and individual results from three different tasks showed a reduced proportion of acceptance and use of the present tense with an ongoing meaning and higher levels of progressive form use by the immigrant group. I have argued that transfer from English selectional properties has reduced the range of aspectual selection of the Spanish present, leading to convergence toward the most restrictive grammatical configuration (L2) and narrowing of possible options in the L1.

In contrast with previous research that focused primarily on the oral production of the progressive in informal contexts (e.g., Klein 1980; Torres Cacoullós 2000), this study examined the written interpretation, listening comprehension, and oral production of specific semantic values of both the present and the progressive forms. This type of methodology allows us to conduct a more fine-grained analysis of the status of the bilingual speaker at three different levels of linguistic performance. Future research should control for the production of present-tense forms among English and Spanish monolingual speakers to determine if the immigrants demonstrate characteristics of both groups.

The results add to the growing body of evidence that interface related features are subject to L1 attrition. Specifically, they corroborate previous claims regarding the role of transfer in the L1 attrition of the ongoing value of the Spanish present and correspondingly higher levels of use of the progressive form (e.g., Klein 1980; Sánchez Muñoz 2004). However, we should note the possibility that these results might not be constrained solely by transfer from English. As Torres Cacoullós (2000) argues, there might be a change in progress in some monolingual informal norms where the use of the present with an ongoing meaning has been displaced by the progressive form. Therefore, it is plausible that long-term immigrants may have been in contact with dialects of Spanish of equal merit (e.g., Mexican Spanish) where the use of the present tense with an ongoing meaning is not preferred, leading to dialectal leveling.

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NOTE

¹The symbol # means that only a nonintended meaning is available (De Swart 1998). For instance, it is possible to use the present progressive in this condition if interpreted as ‘John is running every day recently’.

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