

Tense or aspect: Development of verb forms in Spanish-speaking children's language

Martha Shiro

Abstract

This study examines the use of verbs in three Spanish-speaking children's speech recorded at two different points in time. The children's ages ranged between 2;4 and 2;8 at the earlier recording, and from 2;8 to 3;3 at the later recording. Two children were speakers of the peninsular Spanish dialect (more precisely, from Madrid), and the third child spoke the Spanish dialect of the Canary Islands. As verbs encode information of different kinds (i.e. lexical, temporal, aspectual, deictic and pragmatic), it is difficult to determine the developmental path children follow in verb use. This study focuses on children's developing skills in expressing temporality. Weist (1986) hypothesizes that children start using verbs deictically in the early phases of acquisition and later, they acquire the complex temporal/aspectual system of adult language. The results suggest that young children start marking tense and aspect in a temporal system where the deictic relation to the time of speech is the outstanding feature. Reference to other points in time is restricted, but becomes more frequent as children become older. Though not conclusive, results indicate that the present tense is the most frequent one at an early age, and the frequency of other tenses, particularly the preterite, increases when the child gets a little older. Children mark both aspect and tense when they use verbs, enabling us to conclude that tense and aspect develop jointly, forming a deictic temporal system. This system slowly evolves into an adult-like system, where in addition to speaker-related time reference, a third point in time can also be included.

Key words: Spanish, tense, aspect, children, development.

Tiempo o aspecto: desarrollo de las formas verbales en la lengua de niños hispano-hablantes

Resumen

En este estudio se analiza el uso de los verbos en el habla de tres niños hispano-hablantes registrada en dos momentos diferentes. Las edades de los niños oscilaban entre 2.4 y 2.8 en la primera grabación y de 2.8 a 3.3 en la segunda. Dos de los niños eran madrileños y uno de las Islas Canarias. Como los verbos codifican información de diferentes tipos (léxica, temporal, aspectual, deíctica y pragmática), resulta difícil determinar la vía de desarrollo que los niños siguen en el uso verbal. Este estudio se concentra en las que los niños siguen en el uso verbal. Este estudio se concentra en las destrezas en desarrollo de los niños en su expresión de la temporalidad. Weist (1986) hipotetiza que los niños comienzan a usar los verbos deícticamente en las primeras fases de la adquisición de la lengua y más tarde, adquieren el complejo sistema temporal/aspectual de la lengua de los adultos. Los resultados sugieren que los niños comienzan marcando tiempo y aspecto en un sistema temporal en la cual la relación deíctica con el tiempo del habla es restringida, pero se hace más frecuente a medida que los niños crecen. Aunque no son concluyentes, los resultados indican que el presente de indicativo es el tiempo más usado en los primeros años y que la frecuencia de los otros tiempos -particularmente el pretérito -aumenta a medida que el niño se hace un poco mayor. Los niños marcan tanto el tiempo como el aspecto cuando usan los verbos, llevándonos a la conclusión de que el tiempo y el aspecto se desarrollan conjuntamente formando un sistema deíctico temporal que se transforma lentamente en un sistema similar al del adulto, en el cual además de la referencia temporal relacionada con el hablante, se puede también incluir un tercer punto en el tiempo.

Palabras clave: español, tiempo, aspecto, niños, desarrollo.

1. Introduction

Studying the child's use of the verbal system implies discussing language development at multiple levels of analysis: phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical and pragmatic. Although this is true for all word-classes (nouns, adjectives,

prepositions, etc.), verbs lack some of the concrete features that characterize a great number of nouns, but are equally, if not more, central to utterances. This is reflected in the difficulty to find a precise definition of verbs. Thus, the definition of the Real Academia de la Lengua is: "la parte de la oración que designa estado, acción o pasión, casi siempre con expresión de tiempo y de persona" (the part of the speech which refers to a state, an action or a passion, expressing almost always time/tense and person, Alcina & Blecua, 1987, p.729-730).

Furthermore, studies in lexical development focus on how children attach meaning to words. The referents of nouns are easier to detect based on situational clues than the meaning of verbs. Caregivers can engage in naming activities whereby objects are labeled with the corresponding noun. Thus, nouns can be learned in episodes of "joint attention" of mother and child (Tomasello and Todd, 1983).

Verb meaning is considerably more complex. First, naming activities do not help children attach meaning to verbs. According to Tomasello and Kruger (1992), verbs referring to "impending action" (i.e. *¡toma un caramelo!*) are acquired easier than verbs referring to ongoing action (i.e. *está comiendo un caramelo*). Second, verbs enclose a variety of meanings referring to events, mental states or relations (Halliday, 1985). In addition, these processes are located in relation to the speaker on a temporal axis in a very complex way. Verbs relate the event to the time of speech (deictic function of tenses) and they can also describe aspectual features ("Aktionsart") such as an internal or an external perspective of the event, whether it is punctual, continuous or repeated. Thus, it is easier for most research in lexical development to focus on nouns (generally concrete nouns) and considerably fewer studies deal with the acquisition of verbs.

The verb system has a complex morphology in an inflectional language like Spanish. Inflectional suffixes change according to mood (indicative, imperative, subjunctive), tense (present, past, future), voice (active or passive), aspect (such as progressive or perfective), and person (different suffixes correspond to regular verbs whose infinitive ends in '-ar, '-er, '-ir, while suffixes and stems change in irregular verbs). Furthermore, children must learn how to express modality within a verb phrase either by means of inflection (conditional or subjunctive forms) or by combining one or more modal verbs with another verb.

One of the basic distinctions achieved by verb inflection is that of tense, namely how the verb is located on the temporal axis. This distinction is deictic in the sense that it is expressed with respect to the time of speech. Thus, tense indicates whether the action is simultaneous, prior or subsequent to the speakers utterance. Moreover, there can be a point of reference on the temporal axis (reference time, Weist, 1986) in relation to which the action is located, and which may or not coincide with the time of speech. For example, an event prior to the time of speech can be expressed with the simple past tense as follows:

- (1) *María compró un helado.*

In addition to this deictic relationship, the event can also be situated in relation to another point in time. For instance:

- (2) *María compró un helado después del almuerzo.*

In this case the event is prior to the time of speech but it is subsequent to another point in time (*el almuerzo*).

Verbs can situate one event in relation to another event.

- (3) *Cuando llegaste ya María había comprado el helado.*

The event of buying the ice-cream is prior to the time of speech and is also prior to another event (*llegaste*). In this example it is difficult to decide whether the temporal representation (past in the past) or the aspectual representation (a completed action) is more relevant.

There is an ongoing debate in the study of verb acquisition concerning the order of acquisition of verb-related categories. One hypothesis suggests that children acquire aspect before time. According to this hypothesis, children start using the inflections of past tense as an aspectual distinction rather than a deictic temporal distinction. The advocates of this hypothesis (Antinucci and Miller, 1976) argue that the use of past tense in child language is restricted to certain types of verbs (telic verbs, where the result is incorporated in the verb-meaning) and therefore, they represent resultative aspect rather than a deictic relationship between the event and the speakers time of speech.

The alternative hypothesis (Weist, 1986) posits more convincingly that time and aspect are impossible to separate. Children go through stages in their acquisition of the temporal system. The first and simplest stage is when the child conflates speech time, event time and reference time (speech time stage, Weist, 1986). Hernández (1984) also found in her study of a Spanish-speaking subject, Rafael, that he could only refer to the 'here and now before 22 months of age, a stage that Gili y Gaya (1972) labeled "el inmenso ahora infantil" (the huge childish now). In the next stage, event time varies in relation to speech time, but no distinction is made between speech time and reference time (event time stage, Weist, 1986). In the third stage, children acquire the concept of reference time but its use is limited to the event time context (restricted reference time stage, Weist, 1986). Finally the flexibility of the free reference time system is acquired whereby events can be expressed in relation to three points in time (speech time, reference time and event time, Weist, 1986).

In this paper, childrens speech between the ages of 2 and 3 will be analyzed to determine their developing ability to express temporality. Developmental shifts in verb-related categories will be described. In addition, evidence will be sought to decide which hypothesis better represents the order of acquisition of verbal categories in Spanish-speaking children. Conclusions will be drawn based on the analysis of the data to address the issue of whether the acquisition of aspectual distinctions is prior to temporal distinction (the Antinucci & Miller hypothesis) or whether the evidence supports the simultaneous acquisition of temporal and aspectual distinctions (the Weist hypothesis).

2. The study

2.1. Subjects

The transcripts of three Spanish speaking children at two points in time (between the ages of 2;3 and 3;3) were analyzed for this paper. Two childrens transcripts were taken from the Marrero study in the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 1995). In this study, Victoria Marrero followed six children in a longitudinal study between the ages of 1;8 and 8. Two transcripts of Alfonso and Ida were analyzed at the ages of 2;3 and 2;11, and 2;8 and 3;3 respectively. The third child, Juan was taken from

TABLE 1
 Childrens MLU a two age points in the data

Child	Age	MLU	Age	MLU
Ida	2;8	2.02	3.3	2.85
Alfonso	2;4	2.12	2.11	3.18
Juan	2;4	2.09	2.8	3.29

the Linaza study, also in the CHILDES database, Juans transcripts analyzed here were recorded at the ages of 2;4 and 2;8. It is important to mention that these three children are becoming speakers of two different Spanish dialects. Alfonso and Juan have been exposed to the dialect spoken in Madrid, whereas Ida has been exposed to the Canary Island variety of Spanish. Although the developmental span analyzed in this paper differs slightly in the three children, comparison of their MLU (Mean Length of Utterance, Brown, 1973) measures at the two points in time were very similar (Table 1).

2.1. Procedures

The six transcripts were divided into clauses, and each clause containing at least one verb was coded for mood (declarative, interrogative, imperative, subjunctive), polarity (positive, negative), tense and person. An additional category, "form", recorded special features of the verb such as the presence of an irregular verb or a modal. A tier labeled "temporality" captured the use of temporal expressions other than the verb (e.g. temporal adverbs, adverbials or adverbial clauses). In the tier called "fault", errors of omission or commission were included (e.g. errors in conjugation suffixes or in the verb stem, errors in the use of reflexives or other pronouns). With the help of CLAN (a computer assisted analysis for child language, MacWhinney, 1995) each of these categories were counted in each transcript. The occurrence of verbs was also counted both for types and for tokens. The verbs were classified into semantic categories of action verbs (telic and atelic), mental processes and relational processes.

3. Discussion of results

Hernández (1984), among others, points out that in the early one-word stage verbs are already implied, when they are not explicitly stated. Thus, when the child utters *agua*, she may mean *give me water*, *look at the water* or *I want some water*. Thus, children may be referring to verb meanings before they start using verbs explicitly.

The analysis of the transcripts in the present study indicates that half of Ida's clauses contain verbs, the highest proportion of clauses with verbs of the three children's transcripts. The other two children show a considerable developmental increase in the proportion of clauses containing verbs. Alfonso at 2;11 produces 49% clauses with verbs, and Juan at 2;8 produces 41% (see Table 2).

It is not clear how these percentages compare to adult language, since verbless clauses are equally frequent and acceptable in adult everyday interaction. However, in many cases, errors by omission were found in the children's transcripts. In some cases the auxiliary was missing:

- (4) No visto yo. (i.e. no [he] visto yo, Alfonso 2;3)

In others, the verb was not present. This error was easiest to detect when the copula was missing:

- (5) E(s)te tota (i.e. ésta [pieza] [está] rota, Alfonso 2;3)

These omissions indicate that the child is still struggling with the decision of when the presence of certain verb forms is obligatory, and when it is optional.

TABLE 2
Percentage of clauses containing verbs

Child	Age	Clauses with Verbs	Age	Clauses with Verbs
Ida	2;8	51%	3;3	48%
Alfonso	2;4	33%	2;11	49%
Juan	2;4	37%	2;8	41%

TABLE 3
 Percentage of declarative, interrogative and imperative clauses

Child	Age	Declarative	Interrogative	Imperative	Subjunctive
Ida	2;8	36%	12%	19%	0%
Ida	3;3	52%	14%	14%	0%
Alfonso	2;4	57%	31%	3%	1%
Alfonso	2;11	68%	6%	10%	0%
Juan	2;4	62%	4%	10%	1%
Juan	2;8	61%	10%	8%	0%

With respect to the mood of the clauses containing verbs, we find that most clauses are in the declarative mood, followed in some transcripts by the interrogative and in others by the imperative (see Table 3).

Although we do not expect a one-to-one correspondence between mood and the communicative function of the utterance (i.e. speech act), the presence of the indicative and the imperative indicates a diversification of the functions expressed by the childrens utterances.

Within a functional framework, Halliday (1975) describes three phases in Nigels developing language. In the first phase (until approximately 11 months of age), there is a correspondence between form and function. The child uses different utterances to express the following functions: instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic and imaginative. In the second phase (until approximately 24 months of age), the child uses basically two major language functions: one is pragmatic, where all the above mentioned functions and some new ones are used, and the other is mathetic, the use of language for the purpose of learning. In this transitional stage, the mathetic function of language is the combination of the heuristic and personal functions in the first phase.

This [mathetic] function is realized through verbal observations and recall (and, later, prediction). It generates a range of new meanings for which the child needs

resources of vocabulary (e.g. names of objects and participant)(Halliday, 1975, p.54)

In the third phase, utterances are plurifunctional as in adult speech. Halliday suggests that each utterance carries three major functions: ideational, interpersonal and textual.

In the transcripts analyzed for this paper, we can see how the three children (Ida, Alfonso and Juan) use these functions appropriately. For example, Alfonso at 2;11 says:

- (7) *ALF¹: *sí, qué [/] qué palos [/] qué palos más malos [c] toma más [c] toma, toma, toma, toma, toma, toma [c].*
 *MJO: *¿le pegas [c]?*
 *ALF: *sí, toma, toma, toma [c] a estoy pegando [c].*
 *MJO: *¿le estás pegando, no [c] ?*
 *ALF: *sí, ya a va & pom po(r)ta(r) bien [c].*
 *MJO: *¿se va a portar bien, verdad [c]?*
 *ALF: *sí [c].*

We find that in (7) Alfonso skillfully changes the interpersonal function from talk directed to the interviewer to talk directed to the pencil-sharpener, which is personified and scolded. This interpersonal function is expressed by the mood of the clauses (the shift from the imperative *toma* to the indicative *estoy pegando [el sacapunta]*). The textual function is also reflected in the appropriate use of theme (e.g. *qué palos*) and rheme (e.g. *más malos*). Finally, the ideational function for Halliday is reflected in the type of process represented by the verb in the clause. In (7) most of Alfonso's clauses represent material processes: "*la estoy pegando*", "*toma*", "*se va a portar*". Although the exclamative clause, "*qué palos más malos*" is verbless, the process implied is relational. Thus, it is possible to conclude that these three children use multifunctional utterances as described in Halliday's third developmental phase.

From a developmental perspective, there is no clear trend in how mood varies across age. As Table 3 indicates, Ida and Alfonso use more declarative sentences at an older age, while Juans interrogatives increase sharply, and Idas and Juans imperatives decrease. It is hard to determine from this data if this is due to contextual requirements or developmental factors.

The case of the subjunctive is special in Spanish and it does not correspond clearly to any of Halliday's three functions of

language. Halliday would not even include it as a category in the mood system given that subjunctives occur mainly in subordinate clauses in adult speech (e.g. *Quiero que me digas, Avisame cuando termines*), while Halliday considers mood to be expressed in the main clause. No example of this kind of subjunctive was found in the data, with the exception of two occurrences in Juans transcript at 2;4 where he uses this form while singing (*que llueva; que caiga*). In Spanish the negative imperative form is identical to the second person singular present subjunctive (e.g. *Come, No comas*). No occurrence of this kind of imperative was found in the sample. However, all three children produced certain forms in the present indicative, which can be interpreted as negative imperatives from the context (e.g. *tú no come* meaning *tú no comas* Alfonso at 2;4; *no pujas* meaning *no me empujes*, Juan at 2;4).

The few subjunctive forms found in the sample (5 occurrences in total) correspond to the imperative and strangely, to the same verb *venir* (*venga*). Although not productive, Idas and Juans use of *venga*, may be interpreted as formal address. This type of affirmative imperative (used with the pronoun *Usted* when the vocative is present) also takes on the form of the third person singular present subjunctive. As the degree of formality attached to this imperative form varies across Spanish dialects, it is not clear what degree of formality is intended by this forms in these two childrens dialects. As already mentioned, Ida is exposed to the dialect of the Canary Islands (which is closer to my own Venezuelan dialect), and Juan, to the mainland dialect of Madrid.

With respect to temporal and aspectual distinctions, examination of the transcripts suggests that the present tense is by far the most frequent (see Table 4).

Despite the frequency of the present tense, we find that the children distinguish between present, past and future time (Fracca, 1987). The relative frequency of present, past and future cannot be attributed only to the childs developing competence in expressing temporality. It also depends on the kind of interaction that took place in the interviews whose transcripts were analyzed. Alfonsos interview at 2;3 revolves mainly around naming animals in a book, whereas at 2;11, it focuses on sharpening pencils. Idas first transcript, at 2;8, consists mostly of giving instructions about what to do or not to do, while at 3;3, Idas talk refers to putting together the pieces of a puzzle. Juans transcripts

TABLE 4
 Percentage of present, past (preterite and imperfect) and
 future (simple and periphrastic) tenses

Child	Age	Simple Present	Progr. Present	Present Perfect	Imperfect Past	Preterit Past	Simple Future	Periphr. Future
Ida	2;8	72%	0%	0%	1%	9%	0%	2%
Ida	3;3	72%	1%	0%	2%	11%	0%	8%
Alfonso	2;4	92%	0%	3%	1%	1%	0%	0%
Alfonso	2;11	76%	3%	5%	1%	5%	1%	3%
Juan	2;4	94%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Juan	2;8	62%	0%	23%	0%	5%	2%	0%

refer to how he and his father look after his younger brother, singing when the baby cries. Obviously, none of these activities require much reference to future and past time. Their main focus is rather on the ongoing activities.

Given this context of situation, the incidence of the preterite (e.g. *comí*) in the childrens speech is relatively low. However, the results in Table 4 show that all three children use more verbs in preterite as they grow older. Closer examination of these verbs indicates that Juan did not use it in spontaneous speech. The preterites found in his transcript are all used in a song he was singing for his younger brother. Ida and Alfonso both seem to use the preterite productively. *Se rompió, se acabó* are used several times by both children. As these are telic verbs, the higher frequency of these verbs used in the preterite seems to support the hypothesis that the preterite is first used to express aspectual differences. However, I would attribute this preference to the constraint created by the topic of the conversation rather than to the childrens inability to refer to past time. Moreover, there is evidence that children at this age distinguish between present and future time as all three children in this study show some sign that they can use the future tense. Alfonso and Ida use the periphrastic future productively (e.g. *voy a comer, va a llorar*, also found in the data collected by López Ornat, 1994, a form that is also more common than the simple future in adult speech,

Sedano, 1994). The simple future (*comeré*) is used only once by Alfonso at 2;11 (*necesitarás*), and once by Juan in a song (*amante querrá*).

The imperfect (e.g. *comía*) is mostly used in Spanish to refer to duration in the past as opposed to the preterite which refers mainly to punctual past events. The distinction between imperfect and preterite is aspectual. Ida and Alfonso use the imperfect in a few instances. No major developmental shift is detected in the period in which the analyzed transcripts were collected. The verb *estar* is mainly used in the imperfect (*estaba*) by both children. The impersonal *había* is also used in one instance. In both cases, the imperfect is appropriately used to describe a situation. It is interesting to mention that Alfonso at 2;11 says *iba a pintar*. This sophisticated use of the imperfect in a periphrastic future shows that Alfonso can express the unreal, by stating some intention that failed to materialize.

Another aspectual distinction is shown in the use of the simple present (e.g. *como*), the present progressive (e.g. *estoy comiendo*), and the present perfect (e.g. *he comido*). As already mentioned, the present simple is by far the most frequently used tense in all six transcripts. Unlike Juan, both Ida and Alfonso seem to start using the present progressive productively as they grow older. They both refer to an ongoing activity [e.g. Ida, 3;3 *Está dando vueltas [la grabadora]*, Alfonso, 2;11 *Le estoy pegando*].

The use of the present perfect [e.g. *he comido*] in Juans and Alfonsos speech is further evidence that the preterite is not used to express the result of an action, given that the present perfect is appropriately used in this sense. Juans use of the present perfect is relatively more frequent than Alfonsos but seems to be less productive as it is used exclusively with the verb *romper* (e.g. *se ha roto, la ha roto*). Alfonso uses the present perfect more productively (e.g. *ha caído, ha salido, ha ganado, ha dado*). Similarly, we find that Alfonso has used the verb *caer* in present progressive (*está cayendo*), preterite (*cayó*), imperfect (*caía*), and present perfect (*ha caído*), showing the contrast between past and present, and also between perfective and imperfective aspect.

Thus, the results indicate that all three children have reached Weists second stage (event time stage) in which "children are capable of taking internal and external perspectives on

TABLE 5
Use of adverbials as reference time

Child	Age	Adverbs	Noun Phrases
Ida	2;8	7	2
Ida	3;3	9	3
Alfonso	2;4	15	0
Alfonso	2;11	19	9
Juan	2;4	12	0
Juan	2;8	7	1

situations, and they are able to relate event time to speech time" (Weist, 1986, p.365). There is no evidence in the data to indicate that these three children have reached the flexibility of reference time, event time and speech time of adult speech, because the pluscuamperfect (*había comido*) does not occur in their speech. To use this tense appropriately, three related points in time are necessary. The speaker should be able to distinguish between speech time, reference time (an event mentioned or implied which is prior to speech time), and event time (prior both to speech time and reference time). According to Weist (1986), children do not acquire this ability before the age of 4.

Weist (1986) suggests that the third stage in the acquisition of verb related categories corresponds to a restricted reference time system. This stage is characterized by the presence of some temporal adverbs in childrens speech. However, the temporal prepositions *antes de*, *después de* (*before*, *after*) are expected to be absent, as they would require a separation between speech time, event time and the reference time signaled by these prepositional phrases.

In order to determine whether Ida, Alfonso and Juan have reached Weists third stage (restricted reference time stage), the temporal adverbials occurring in the transcripts were analyzed.

As indicated in Table 5, reference time expressed by all three children is limited to adverbs and noun phrases. No adverbial clauses were used. The deictic adverbs *ya*, *ahora*, *todavía* are the most frequent, and amongst them *ya* is by far the most frequent

adverb used by all three children. This adverb is used in several senses in Spanish, all of which can best be explained from a pragmatic perspective. This adverb can mean *already*, as in *ya acabé* (Alfonso, 2;11), or *no more*, as in *ya no llora* (Juan 2;4), or it can appear in a fixed expression as in *ya está* (*its done, its over*). The other adverbs or noun phrases with adverbial function (e.g. *otra vez*, *otro día*) are also deictic. The temporal prepositions *después de*, and *antes de* are absent, as expected. However, Alfonso at 2;11 says:

- (8) *Apé va llolá* (i.e. *después va a llorar*).
(Alfonso, 2;11)

This particular use of *después*, meaning *afterwards*, or *later* is again deictic and it relates event time to speech time.

Thus, it becomes evident from the data that the use of adverbials in these childrens speech corresponds to event time related to speech time, and it does not denote a third point in time. Therefore, we can conclude that the adverbials in all three childrens speech refer to event time exclusively, which, from Weists perspective, is an indication of the restricted reference time stage.

4. Conclusions

Analysis of this small sample suggests that Spanish-speaking children tend to decrease the frequency of verbless clauses in their speech around the age of 3. Their utterances are multi-functional, expressing interpersonal relations based on mood. Analysis of this small data suggests that it is impossible to determine a clear developmental pattern in childrens use of mood.

As far as tense is concerned, the simple present is the most frequently used tense. The frequency of the remaining tenses used at this age (present continuous, preterite, imperfect, periphrastic and simple future) tends to increase with age, particularly the occurrence of the preterite. With respect to the debate regarding the order of acquisition, evidence in the data suggests that although children mark aspectual distinctions, they also mark temporal distinctions, as long as these distinctions are deictic (related to speaker time). The adverbial use also supports this hypothesis, enabling us to conclude that tense and aspect

develop jointly, forming a deictic temporal system that slowly evolves into an adult-like system, where in addition to speaker-related time reference, a third point in time can also be included.

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