

Acquisition of infinitival constructions in L2 Portuguese by Spanish native speakers: a Feature Reassembly approach

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This talk discusses the acquisition of the Prepositional Infinitival Construction (PIC) as a complement of perception verbs by Spanish learners of European Portuguese (EP).

In Romance languages, the PIC (1) and the Gerund Construction (GC) (2) tend to occur in complementary distribution (Casalicchio, 2019). This is the case in EP and Spanish: Only the PIC is available (in the standard variety) in EP, whereas only the GC is available in Spanish. What is more, both languages make available other infinitival constructions that can also occur as complements of perception verbs (e.g., ECM).

(1) a. O professor viu-os a ler a gramática.
the teacher saw-CL.ACC to.ASP read.INF the grammar
'The teacher saw them reading the grammar.'

b. O professor viu-os a lerem a gramática.
the teacher saw-CL.ACC to.ASP read.INF.3PL the grammar
'The teacher saw them reading the grammar.'

(2) Vi a Juan conduciendo una furgoneta blanca. [Rafel 1999: 202 (44a)]
saw.1SG A Juan driving.GER a van white
'I saw Juan driving a white van.'

Crucially, the PIC and the GC share semantic and syntactic properties (both being analysed as small clauses): They both have a progressive aspectual value, and they are traditionally analysed as small clauses (Raposo, 1989; Rafel, 2000; Barbosa & Cochofel, 2005; Casalicchio, 2019). However, the progressive aspectual value has different morphological counterparts in both languages. In Spanish, it corresponds to a Gerund verb form and in EP to an aspectual head (the preposition *a*, 'to') plus an inflected or uninflected infinitival verb form (Duarte, 1992).

Following the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere, 2008, 2009), we predict that Spanish learners will have difficulties reassembling the aspectual features of the GC into the ones of the PIC due to difficulties identifying the contrasts in the respective morphological counterparts. Furthermore, we hypothesise that Spanish learners will perform better considering the PIC with uninflected infinitive than with inflected infinitive since Spanish does not make available complements with inflected infinitives, and consequently, the acquisition of such structures entails a feature addition task (namely, ϕ -features).

Three experimental tasks were designed in order to collect complementary data on the acquisition of the PIC: an acceptability judgment task (AJT), a sentence completion task (SCT) and a forced choice task (FCT). For each task, we tested a control group of monolingual EP speakers and three groups of adult Spanish learners of EP (formal instruction context) with distinct levels of proficiency: initial, intermediate, and advanced. In the AJT, we compared the acceptability rates of PIC with inflected and uninflected infinitive; in the SCT, the preference rates of the inflected and uninflected infinitive PIC with another infinitival complement only available in EP: the Inflected Infinitive structure; and, in the FCT, the preference rates of the inflected infinitive PIC with a non-standard structure (Accusative subject plus inflected infinitive) with similarities to the Exceptional Case Marking (ECM), a structure available in both languages.

The data from the three tasks show that Spanish learners struggle with PIC even in advanced levels of proficiency. Overall, we found statistically significant differences between the control group and all test groups ($p < .05$), indicating a lower acceptance rate of PIC by the latter. The AJT and the SCT show that Spanish learners prefer PIC with uninflected infinitives.

Furthermore, the FCT shows that all L2 groups tend to reject PIC with inflected infinitive in favour of the non-standard structure closer to ECM (a complement structure available both in the L1 and the L2). Additionally, in the corrections provided in the AJT, Spanish learners do not replace PIC by GC, but mainly by instances of ECM. We hypothesise that this difficulty in acquiring the PIC may result from a difficulty in reassembling the relevant features and from an L1 pre-emption effect (Iverson & Rothman, 2014): Spanish learners may unconsciously deem the properties of the ECM structure of their L1 as sufficient to account for the EP input.

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