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# The acquisition of the semantic values of the Spanish present tense in L2 and heritage Spanish

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We examine the acquisition of the semantic values of the Spanish present tense among second language learners and Spanish heritage speakers, an area so far underexplored. We predict bilingualism effects evidenced in lower patterns of use, acceptance and preference of the simple present with an ongoing meaning, as well as preference for the progressive in ongoing and habitual contexts. Furthermore, we expect the heritage speakers to outperform the L2 learners, and to behave closer to native speakers. In contrast to our expectations, we found overextension of the simple present to ongoing situations and to contexts where the present progressive is preferred. The heritage speakers behaved closer to the native speakers, suggesting age-related effects in language development. We argue for morphosemantic convergence towards the less aspectually restrictive configuration.

**Keywords:** tense and aspect, Spanish present tense, L2 acquisition, heritage language acquisition, age effects, bilingualism effects

## 1. Introduction

The current study examines the extent to which English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish and Spanish heritage speakers born and raised in the United States (U.S.) have knowledge of the semantic values of the Spanish present tense (simple present and present progressive). Heritage speakers refer to second-generation immigrants or early arrivals exposed to a minority language during early age in a natural/home context where a majority language was also spoken (e.g., Montrul, 2008; Valdés, 2001). While research on the acquisition of past tense aspectual distinctions is extensive (e.g., Montrul, 2002; Montrul & Slabakova, 2003; Pérez-Leroux, Cuza, Majlanova, & Sánchez-Naranjo, 2008; Salaberry, 1999; Salaberry &

Shirai, 2002), research on the acquisition of present tense aspectual distinctions remains underexplored, with a few exceptions (e.g., Cuza, 2008; Geeslin & Fafulas, 2012; Klein, 1980; Sánchez-Muñoz, 2004). This area is interesting to examine because, in contrast with English, Spanish allows the use of the simple present with either an ongoing (1a) or habitual interpretation (1b) (e.g., Alarcos-Llorach, 1994; D’Introno, 2001; Yllera Fernández, 1999). English, on the other hand, does not allow the use of the simple present with an ongoing meaning (1c), and the progressive must be used (e.g., Cowper, 1998; Schmitt, 2001). However, both languages behave similarly in that they allow the simple present with a habitual meaning (1b, 1d), the present progressive with an ongoing meaning (2a, 2c), and the present progressive with a habitual/temporary meaning (2b, 2d) (Slabakova, 2003). This is represented in Table 1 below:

**Table 1.** Present tense aspectual values in Spanish and English

Simple Present	Spanish	English
ongoing	(1a) Lisa conduce al trabajo en estos momentos. <sup>a</sup>	(1c) *Lisa drives to work right now.
habitual	(1b) Lisa conduce al trabajo todos los días.	(1d) Lisa drives to work every day.
Present Progressive	Spanish	English
ongoing	(2a) Lisa está conduciendo al trabajo en estos momentos.	(2c) Lisa is driving to work right now.
habitual/ temporary	(2b) Lisa está conduciendo al trabajo últimamente.	(2d) Lisa is driving to work lately. <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The translations of Spanish examples are provided side by side on the English column.

<sup>b</sup> English also uses the present perfect continuous for this aspectual meaning (e.g., Lisa has been driving to work lately).

As represented in Table 1, there are no differences between the two languages in regard to the semantic values of the present progressive. However, the representational differences between the two languages in the simple present might cause English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish and Spanish heritage speakers to behave differently concerning their aspectual choices due to bilingualism effects (e.g., Cuza, 2008; Klein, 1980; Gabriele & Martohardjono, 2005). For example, they might show lower patterns of use and preference of the simple present with an ongoing meaning or they might overextend the present across the board. Since the simple present and the present progressive in Spanish are semantically interchangeable (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Westfall, 1995), we also expect differences in the participants’ patterns of use and preference of the present progressive. We do not expect difficulties with the habitual value of the simple present, as this is

quite categorical in both languages, specifically when coerced by an external operator (e.g., adverbial operator like *usually*). However, it is possible that bilingual speakers might have difficulty with the habitual/temporary value of the progressive, as this structure is not frequent in day-to-day input in Spanish.

In addition to the existing differences between the two languages and potential cross-linguistic influence effects in regard to the simple present, the acquisition task might be further taxed by the fact the use of simple present with an ongoing meaning is not frequent in day-to-day input, and the progressive form is often preferred in Spanish. Furthermore, this grammatical structure is not typically reinforced in language courses. Thus, L2 learners and heritage speakers might transfer the semantic values of the English simple present into Spanish leading to a contraction in the scope of lexical selection. Furthermore, if previous proposals on age-related effects in L2 and heritage language acquisition are correct, we would expect heritage speakers to outperform the L2 learners given their exposure to Spanish from birth, and subsequently more input and use of Spanish in a natural setting (e.g., Coppieters, 1987; Cuza & Frank, 2015; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003; Montrul, 2008, 2010; Montrul, Foote, & Perpiñán, 2008).

The study is organized as follows. Section 2 summarizes existing differences between the English and Spanish present tense in regard to aspectual selection. Section 3 discusses previous research on the acquisition of the aspectual values of the Spanish present, our research questions and hypotheses. Section 4 presents our study, followed by the results in Section 5. The paper concludes with the discussion and conclusions in Section 6.

## 2. The semantics of the Spanish and English present tense

English and Spanish diverge regarding the semantic values of the present tense. In Spanish, the simple present has a wider spectrum of situational values, which precede or follow the speech act (e.g., Alarcos-Llorach, 1994; Alcina & Blecua, 1975; Yllera Fernández, 1999). Besides its habitual meaning (3a), the simple present can have an ongoing interpretation (3b), a futurate interpretation (3c), a historical present interpretation (3d), and a reportive interpretation (3e) (e.g., Schmitt, 2001; Torres-Cacoullós, 2000). This is represented in (3a–3e) below:

- (3) a. *María estudia todos los días.* [habitual]  
       “Mary studies everyday.”  
       b. *Lisa cena con sus padres ahora.* [ongoing]  
       “Lisa is having dinner with her parents now.”

- |    |   |              |
|----|---|--------------|
| c. | <i>Llego a La Habana en el primer vuelo.</i>              | [futurate]   |
|    | “I arrive to Habana in the first flight.”                 |              |
| d. | <i>Colón descubre América en 1492.</i>                    | [historical] |
|    | “Columbus discovers America in 1492.”                     |              |
| e. | <i>Ernesto sale al balcón y se fuma un cigarro.</i>       | [reportive]  |
|    | “Ernesto goes out to the balcony and smokes a cigarette.” |              |

In (3b), the simple present refers to an ongoing or continuous event in the present, while in (3c) it refers to an event that will occur in the near future. In (3d), the historical present is used to provide a more current or lively connotation of a past event, and in (3e), the reportive present reports an event that is occurring simultaneously with the moment of speech. Although it is more common to use the present progressive for ongoing events, the simple present parallels with the progressive in that they can both refer to an ongoing event simultaneous to the speech act (e.g., Alarcos Llorach, 1994; Comrie, 1976; Schmitt, 2001; Yllera Fernández, 1999). In addition to the traditional ongoing meaning of the present progressive, its aspectual values have extended to include immediate future readings (i.e., *Estamos llegando mañana* “We are arriving tomorrow”)<sup>1</sup>, an iterative meaning (i.e., *Están viniendo muchos turistas a Cuba*, “Many tourists are coming to Cuba”), and a habitual interpretation restricted to a specific period (i.e., *Miguel está trabajando mucho últimamente*, “Miguel is working too much lately”) (e.g., Aponte-Alequín & Ortiz López, 2010; Cortés-Torres, 2005; Torres-Cacoulllos, 2000). The temporary-habitual state of the progressive allows a coerced ‘lately’ or ‘recently’ interpretation in both Spanish (e.g., Fernández Ramírez, 1957; Schmitt, 2001; Yllera Fernández, 1999) and English (i.e., I’m loving it!) (e.g., de Swart, 1998; Slabakova, 2003).

In contrast with Spanish, the English present tense does not allow an ongoing interpretation. For ongoing interpretations, the progressive must be used (John is singing/\*sings right now). As in Spanish, the English simple present allows a habitual meaning (i.e., John plays tennis everyday), a futurate value (i.e., The students arrive tomorrow), a historical present interpretation (i.e., Lincoln signs the emancipation proclamation in 1863), a reportive value (i.e., Rose closes the window, and notices there is smoke outside), and a temporary-habitual interpretation (i.e., Cuca is traveling too much) (e.g., Cowper, 1998; de Swart, 1998; Giorgi & Pianesi, 1997; Schmitt, 2001; Slabakova, 2003). It is argued that the notion of progressiveness is interrelated with predicate type; thus, stative verbs (i.e., to know, to see) do not typically allow a progressive form (\*John is knowing the truth).

1. The use of the progressive to refer to an immediate future event is very common in Caribbean varieties of Spanish (e.g., Aponte-Alequín & Ortiz López, 2010; Cortés-Torres, 2005) and in most of Latin America. However, this is not allowed in Peninsular Spanish.

However, there are exceptions to this rule as there are stative verbs that can take a non-stative interpretation depending on the specific meaning being conveyed (i.e., I'm being silly) (Comrie, 1976). Furthermore, the progressive can also have a temporary habitual meaning (Slabakova, 2003) (i.e., Mike is being lazy today).

## 2.1 A selectional view to aspectual differences

The semantic differences discussed in the previous section between the Spanish and English present tense can be adequately accounted for by de Swart's (1998) selectional approach to aspectual differences. de Swart follows Kamp and Reyle's (1993) *Discourse Representation Theory* to argue that aspectual differences are determined by the semantic patterns of tense morphemes in semantic composition with other elements in the phrase (e.g., adverbs). She examines preterite versus imperfect aspectual differences in English, French and other Romance languages and concludes that aspectual differences are compositionally formed and layered. She follows Verkuyl's (1972) compositional perspective on aspectual differences, which argues that aspectual values are the result of the compositional relation between the verb and other elements in the phrase (Verb+Arguments=Aspect).

The argument that aspect is layered is based on the principle that aspect is determined at the lowest layer of the predicate-argument structure defined as *eventuality description* (lexical classes). The verb and other elements in the phrase determine the eventuality description (lower layer); it can be an event, a state or a process. State and process eventualities have no inherent endpoint and are classified as "homogeneous". On the other hand, achievements and accomplishment predicates (events) have an inherent endpoint and are classified as 'heterogeneous'. The upper layer is made up of tense and aspectual operators. There may be one grammatical operator or more (e.g. adverbs, direct objects, prepositional phrases) and they can shift the eventuality description if there is a clash between the tense operators (e.g. past tense morphemes *-ba* or *-é* in Spanish for first person singular) and their respective aspectual notions (perfective versus imperfective). In contrast with Romance languages, de Swart (1998) argues that there are no selectional restrictions in English. The tense head (simple past) is neutral in that it applies to either a homogeneous or a heterogeneous event. This analysis differs from Georgi and Pianesi's (1997) morphosyntactic perspective, which argue that aspectual features are determined by the instantiation of [ $\pm$  perfective] features.

### 3. The acquisition and use of the Spanish present tense

Previous research on the representation and use of the semantic properties of the Spanish present tense has shown difficulties among English-speaking L2 learners, Spanish heritage speakers and long-term immigrants in the U.S. (e.g., Cuza, 2008, 2010; Klein, 1980; Pérez-Cortés, 2012; Sánchez-Muñoz, 2004). Klein (1980) is the first and most seminal study on the use of the Spanish simple present and present progressive among Spanish-English bilinguals. The author investigated the role of cross-linguistic influence from English in the use of the present versus the progressive among Spanish-English bilinguals born in the U.S. or who arrived before the age of 8;0 (bilingual group, heritage speakers of Spanish). She compared their results with a group of native speakers who arrived to the U.S. after the age of 16 (control group). All of the participants were of Puerto Rican background living in New York City, and none had formal education in Spanish beyond high school. The data was collected via a semi-spontaneous oral interview/conversation and a picture description task. Results showed significantly less use of the simple present with an ongoing meaning among the bilingual group compared to the control group, and a preference towards the progressive. Klein argues that the bilingual group has undergone a process of semantic change due to cross-linguistic interference from English. This accounts for the overextension of the present progressive in comparison with the control group.

In a similar vein, Sánchez-Muñoz (2004) examined the role of transfer effects from English in the use of the progressive tense among Spanish-English bilinguals of Mexican background living in Los Angeles, California. The author tested Spanish heritage speakers, long-term Spanish-speaking immigrants, and monolingual speakers of Mexican and Peninsular Spanish via a picture description task and a fill-in-the-gap questionnaire. As in Klein's (1980) study, results showed higher frequency of use of the progressive at the expense of the present form among the bilingual speakers. The bilingual speakers consistently preferred the progressive in ongoing situations, in contrast with the Mexican and Peninsular Spanish monolingual speakers, which suggests transfer effects from English. The author concludes that the differences between bilingual and monolingual speakers stem from semantic transfer from English and L2 convergence (e.g., Silva-Corvalán, 1994; Weinreich, 1974).

In regard to second language acquisition, Cuza (2008) is the first study to look at the extent to which English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish have knowledge of the semantic values of the Spanish present tense. Following de Swart's (1998) selectional approach to aspectual variation, Cuza examined the ongoing value of the Spanish present as well as other semantic interpretations including the habitual meaning of the present and the ongoing and habitual value of the progressive.

Results from a written acceptability judgment task, a truth value judgment task, and an oral narrative (*Frog Story*) showed low levels of acceptance, interpretation and use of the simple present with an ongoing meaning, compared to monolingual speakers. The author concluded that transfer from English selectional values (+habitual, -ongoing) had reduced the aspectual selectional values of the Spanish present (+habitual, +ongoing), leading to new aspectual and grammatical configurations in Spanish, confirming previous research (e.g., Klein, 1980; Sánchez-Muñoz, 2004).

More recently, Pérez-Cortés (2012) investigated the role of transfer of the feature [ $\pm$ future] of the present progressive in Spanish among Spanish-English bilinguals (e.g., *Estoy viajando a México la semana próxima* “I’m traveling to Mexico next week”) and the extent to which this was correlated with lexical aspect. Data were elicited via a grammaticality judgment task implemented to a group of advanced L2 learners and Spanish heritage speakers. Results showed a tendency to generalize the futurate reading of the progressive, crucially with activity verbs, among both heritage speakers (23%) and L2 learners (36%). Native speakers in contrast accepted these constructions at lower rates. Pérez-Cortés’ results might stem from the fact that some of the native speakers in her study were speakers of Peninsular Spanish, where the use of the progressive with a future reading is not allowed. However, this is completely acceptable in most varieties of Latin American Spanish (e.g., Aponte-Alequín & Ortiz-López, 2010; Torres-Cacoullós, 2000). Therefore, it is possible that the results do not necessarily stem from transfer from English but from contact with varieties of Spanish in the U.S. where this futurate feature of the progressive is a productive strategy.<sup>2</sup>

Geeslin and Fafulas (2012) followed a functional approach to examine the frequency of use of the present progressive in L2 learners of Spanish. Particularly, the authors were interested in the linguistic variables that constrain the use of progressive forms, including lexical aspect, type of adverb, animacy of the subject, person, number, and clause type. Results from a video-narration task showed a pattern of progressive tense use among the L2 learners with adverbs and animate subjects, in contrast with the controls, where these two variables were not significant. The authors also found an elevated pattern of simple present use in the two groups –nearly 80% of the total forms used. However, the L2 learners used the progressive tense significantly more than the native speakers. The authors concluded that L2 learners are capable of acquiring the semantic constraints underlying native speakers’ use of present and progressive forms. Their results, however, are limited

2. A reviewer is concerned that geographical factors might also constrain the results of the current study. This is not applicable to our study as the aspectual values that we examine are extended to all varieties of Spanish.



by the use of an oral narration task as the main and only measure. Oral narratives have a bias towards the use of the simple present, and thus not ideal when looking at the frequency of use of the present progressive. Their results should be further corroborated with additional tasks.

### 3.1 Research questions and hypotheses

Previous research on the semantic values of the present tense is limited, as mentioned earlier. This is particularly so in regard to the acquisition of the ongoing value of the simple present. Existing work has focused crucially on the status of the progressive tense with an ongoing interpretation or with a futurate meaning (e.g., Geeslin & Fafulas, 2010; Pérez-Cortés, 2012; Sánchez-Muñoz, 2004). However, this work is limited in that it has not examined the elicited production of these semantic values, and has relied considerably on semi-spontaneous data. We cover this gap in the literature by a) examining the habitual and ongoing semantic values of both the simple present and the present progressive; b) by examining a bilingual population of heritage speakers so far unexplored and comparing their linguistic representation with that of L2 learners and native speakers; and c) by introducing a more comprehensive set of elicitation tasks looking at elicited oral production, grammatical intuition as well as preference. Furthermore, we contribute to previous research by providing a detailed analysis of native and non-native speakers' preference and use of the present progressive with a habitual/temporary meaning (e.g., *Lisa está trabajando mucho últimamente* "Lisa is working too much lately"). No previous research has looked at the status of this structure in L2 learners or heritage speakers of Spanish. It is also unclear up to this point what native speakers of Spanish actually do in this regard, given that the progressive in this case can be interchangeable with the simple present.

Following previous theoretical work on the existing differences between English and Spanish selectional properties of the present tense, we examine the extent to which L2 learners of Spanish and heritage speakers have knowledge of the semantic values of the Spanish present. It is possible that L2 learners and heritage speakers behave differently from native speakers, and among themselves, crucially with the ongoing value of the simple present and the ongoing and habitual values of the progressive. Although the use of the simple present with an ongoing meaning is grammatical in Spanish, the progressive is also possible, and typically preferred by native speakers. This creates ambiguity in the input leading to asymmetries between groups regarding preference and use (e.g., O'Grady, Kwak, Lee, & Lee, 2011; Yang, 2002). Comparing L2 learners and heritage speakers is relevant in order to shed light on issues relative to age-related effects in the acquisition process given previous research documenting morphosyntactic advantages

by heritage speakers over L2 learners (e.g., Cuza & Frank, 2015; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003; Montrul, 2006; Montrul et al., 2008). Specifically, our study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: To what extent do English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish and Spanish heritage speakers have knowledge of the morphosemantic values of the Spanish simple present and present progressive? Crucially:
- i. what is their knowledge of the ongoing and habitual meaning of the Spanish simple present?
  - ii. what are their patterns of use and preference regarding the ongoing and habitual meaning of the Spanish present progressive?
- RQ2: Is the acquisition of the semantic values of the present tense in Spanish subject to age-related effects? And if so, will heritage speakers of Spanish outperform L2 learners given their exposure to the language since birth and therefore more extended input and use?

We expect L2 learners and heritage speakers to behave differently from native speakers in regard to the semantic values of the Spanish present, and activate aspectual patterns typically unpreferred by native speakers. We expect this to stem from different morphosemantic properties in the two languages, crucially regarding the use of the simple present with an ongoing meaning, an option not available in English. Specifically, L2 learners and heritage speakers may transfer the selectional properties of the English simple present (+habitual, -ongoing), which represent a more restrictive grammatical configuration *vis as vis* the Spanish simple present (+habitual, +ongoing). This might lead to a narrowing of the range of aspectual selection in Spanish and convergence with English. If this is indeed the case, we would expect both experimental participants to show low levels of use, acceptance and preference for the simple present with an ongoing value. Furthermore, bilingual speakers might behave differently from the native speakers in regard to the use of the progressive, overextending it to contexts where the simple present should be used. We also expect heritage speakers to outperform L2 learners given their earlier exposure to the language and consequently more extensive language input and use (e.g., Montrul, 2006; Montrul et al., 2008). Specifically, we hypothesize the following:

- H1: L2 learners and heritage speakers will show lower levels of use, intuition and preference of the simple present with an ongoing meaning. Given the existing differences between English and Spanish, they might overextend the progressive to contexts where the simple present is often preferred.
- H2: L2 learners and heritage speakers will show no differences *vis a vis* native speakers in their use, intuition or acceptance of the simple present with a

habitual meaning. This is a core semantic value available in both languages and quite frequent in day-to-day input.

H3: L2 learners and heritage speakers will behave differently from native speakers in regard to their use and preference of the present progressive with an ongoing and a habitual/temporary meaning. The fact that both the simple present and the progressive allow for ongoing and habitual meanings in Spanish might cause bilingual speakers to overextend the simple present to these contexts as they converge into a less aspectually sensitive form.

H4: If maturational factors play a role in L2 and heritage language development as previously argued, we expect the heritage speakers to outperform the L2 learners.

In the following section we discuss the study and the results.

## 4. The study

### 4.1 Participants

A total of 35 participants ( $n=35$ ) took part in the study: 13 English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish, 13 Spanish heritage speakers, and 9 native speakers of Spanish participated as the control baseline. The participants completed a language history questionnaire, which elicited information on their linguistic background, patterns of language use and their self-assessment of Spanish and English skills. Furthermore, the participants completed a modified version of the DELE language proficiency test for Latin American Spanish (Cuza, Pérez-Leroux, & Sánchez, 2013).<sup>3</sup> Following previous research, scores between 40 to 50 points were considered as 'advanced' proficiency level, 30 to 39 points were considered 'intermediate' proficiency, and 0 to 29 points were considered 'low' proficiency (e.g., Montrul & Slabakova, 2003). All of the participants were tested at the principal investigator's language acquisition lab.

The L2 learner group consisted of English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish born and raised in the U.S. (mean age at testing=21 years old; age range=19–27

3. This proficiency test is composed of a vocabulary task from the MLA Foreign Language Test and a cloze test from the *Diploma de Español como Lengua Segunda* (DELE) test. It was first developed by White and colleagues at McGill University (see Duffield & White, 1999) and it has been successfully used ever since to test both L2 learners and heritage speakers' proficiency levels (see Montrul & Slabakova, 2003). For the purpose of this paper, we implemented Cuza, Pérez-Leroux, and Sánchez's (2013) modified version of the original test. This version has adapted some of the lexical items of the vocabulary section to Latin American Spanish and uses a completely different cloze section.

years of age). Their mean score in DELE test was 35/50. Most participants reported that they speak 'English' or 'mostly English' at home and work (77% respectively), while 23% reported 'mostly Spanish', 'slightly more Spanish' or 'equal English and Spanish'. In social situations, again 77% indicated that they speak 'English' or 'mostly English', and 23% reported speaking 'mostly Spanish', 'slightly more Spanish' or 'equal English and Spanish'. Only 15% of the participants (2/13) indicated feeling equally comfortable in both languages, while 85% indicated feeling more comfortable in English. They reported to have native-like proficiency in English (3.9/4) and adequate/good proficiency in Spanish (2.7/4).

The heritage speakers' group consisted of Spanish heritage speakers born and raised in the U.S., except for two<sup>4</sup> (mean age at testing=19 years old; age range=18–22 years of age). Their parents were born in Mexico, Argentina, the U.S. and Peru. Their mean score in the DELE proficiency score was 41/50. In regard to patterns of language use, 46% (6/13) of them reported speaking 'Spanish' or 'mostly Spanish' at home, 31% (4/13) reported speaking 'equal English and Spanish', and 23% (3/13) reported speaking 'mostly English' or 'slightly more English'. The majority of the participants reported to use more English at school, work, and social situations, and 77% indicated feeling comfortable in both English and Spanish; the other 23% indicated feeling more comfortable in English. Their reported self-proficiency was almost native-like (3.7/4) in English and almost good/fluent (3.1/4) in Spanish.

The native speakers group was composed of native Spanish speakers from Spain, Colombia and Argentina, who have recently arrived to the U.S. (Mean age at testing=25 years old; age range=20–34; mean length of residence=5 months; length of residence range= 2–13 months). They reported to have adequate knowledge of English (2.7/4) and excellent knowledge of Spanish (3.9/4). Since they had all arrived recently to the U.S. they did not have to complete the DELE test.

## 4.2 Structures under analysis

The goal of the present study is to examine whether L2 learners and heritage speakers have acquired the semantic values of the Spanish present tense, including the simple present and the present progressive. Specifically, we examine the following conditions:

### i. Simple present with ongoing meaning:

- (4) *Juan canta en la ducha en estos momentos.*  
 "John is singing in the shower right now."

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4. One participant was born in Mexico and came to the U.S. before the age of one. Another participant was born in Argentina and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of ten.

ii. Simple present with habitual meaning:

- (5) *Juan canta en la ducha todas la mañanas.*  
 “John sings in the shower every morning.”

iii. Present progressive with ongoing meaning

- (6) *Juan está cantando en la ducha en estos momentos.*  
 “John is singing in the shower right now.”

iv. Present progressive with habitual meaning (temporary habitual)

- (7) *Juan está cantando en la ducha últimamente.*  
 “John is singing in the shower lately.”

There were a total of 20 test tokens (5 test tokens per each condition) plus 20 distracters. The distracters were part of a separate study examining the use and distribution of pronominal subjects with inanimate reference in heritage speakers of Cuban Spanish (Cuza & Camacho, forthcoming). All of the progressive ongoing contexts appeared with an adverbial phrase indicating that the event was simultaneous to the moment of speech (*En estos momentos, Lisa está caminando a la escuela* “Lisa is walking to school right now”).

### 4.3 Methods

Following previous research, the participants completed an elicited production task (sentence completion task), an acceptability judgment task, and a forced preference task (e.g., Cuza & Frank, 2015; Montrul, 2004). All of the tasks were implemented aurally with the aid of PowerPoint and a laptop computer. Each context and test token was read aloud to the participant, and their responses were digitally recorded for further analysis. One of the authors (a native speaker of Spanish) conducted the experiment in a private room. As in previous work, the elicited production task was conducted first, followed by the acceptability judgment task and finally the forced preference task. The forced preference task was implemented last to prevent any sort of priming effect on the other two tasks. Tasks were randomized and counterbalanced across the participants to avoid any potential presentation order effects. The contexts and test tokens used were about Lisa Simpson and her family, a fictional character from the animated television series *The Simpsons*. All tasks were piloted before the actual implementation.

The elicited production task meant to elicit the oral production of both the simple present and the present progressive in the contexts specified in 4.2. Participants were presented with a context and a photo; they were then asked to complete a sentence on the basis of the story and the photo, as shown in (8) below:

*Elicited production task: Sentence completion task*(8) *Simple present -ongoing meaning**photo of Lisa and her mother here*Context: *Hoy Lisa está muy molesta. En este momento su mamá llega a casa y le pregunta...**"Lisa is very upset today. Her mother arrives home now and asks Lisa..."*Prompt: *¿Lisa, qué \_\_\_\_\_? (pasarte "to happen, you")**"Lisa, what's \_\_\_\_\_?"*Expected Answer: *Lisa, ¿qué te pasa?**"What's happening to you?" (coded as 1)*Unexpected Answer: *Lisa, ¿qué te está pasando?**"What's happening to you? (coded as 0)*

The participant had to complete the sentence using the verb provided in parenthesis, which was given in its infinitive form.

The acceptability judgment task was meant to elicit the grammatical intuition of the participants as far as the use of the ongoing value of the simple present was concerned. As in the elicited production task, they were presented with a short context followed by a sentence. They were then asked to read the sentence, and indicate whether the sentence was *completely odd*, *odd*, *neither odd nor good*, *good* or *completely good* in Spanish according to the context. If the participant thought the sentence was *odd* or *slightly odd* they were asked to explain why. This is shown in (9) below:

*Acceptability Judgment Task*(9) *Present progressive -ongoing meaning**photo of Lisa playing with Bart here*Context: *La madre de Lisa la llama por teléfono pero Lisa no responde porque está ocupada. ¿Por qué Lisa no responde?**"Lisa's mother is calling her over the phone but Lisa does not respond. Why doesn't she respond?"*Target: *Porque en estos momentos, Lisa está jugando con Bart.**"Because Lisa is playing with Bart right now."*

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

completely odd   odd   neither good nor bad   good   completely good

Expected response: *good or completely good*

If the participant chose "completely odd" or "odd" and the reason was unrelated to the use of the present or the progressive tense, the response was discarded from

the quantitative analysis. As in the previous task, there were a total of 20 test token and 19 distracters.

Finally, we implemented a forced preference task. This task is meant to assess the internal preference that bilingual speakers have about certain structures, and has been used successfully in previous research with heritage speakers of Spanish and L2 learners (e.g., Cuza & Frank, 2015; Montrul & Ionin, 2010). The participants were asked to read a context and then choose which of two sentences they preferred better. This is represented in (10) below:

### *Preference Task*

(10) *Simple present –ongoing meaning*

*photo of Lisa and her family traveling here*

Context: *La familia de Lisa se va de vacaciones y Lisa ya está apurada por llegar a su destino. Lisa le pregunta a su papá...* “Lisa’s family is going on vacation and Lisa is in a hurry to get to the where they are heading, and she asks her father:”

- a.   X   *Papá, ¿por qué manejas tan despacio?*  
“Dad, why are you driving so slowly?”
- b.        *Papá, ¿por qué estás manejando tan despacio?*  
“Dad, why are you driving so slowly?”

Expected response: a (1 point awarded)

Unexpected response: b (0 point awarded)

As in the previous tasks, the tokens were randomized and counterbalanced across participants. Given that both the simple present and the present progressive are both possible with an ongoing meaning, as well as the fact that the nature of the elicitation tasks played no role in the preference or use of one form over the other, we carefully selected five test tokens for the simple present ongoing condition where the use of the simple present would be more likely to be used. The initial selection of tokens was based on the author’s own native intuition of Spanish, and they were later piloted among native speakers. The test tokens for this specific condition were the following:

- (11) a. *Lisa, ¿qué melodías tocas?*  
“Lisa, what melody are you playing?”
- b. *Lisa, ¿qué te pasa?*  
“Lisa, what is happening to you?”
- c. *Hermanito, ¿por qué caminas tan rápido?*  
“Little brother, why are you waking so slowly?”
- d. *Lisa, ¿qué bebes?*  
“Lisa, what are you drinking?”

- e. *Papá, ¿por qué manejas tan rápido?*  
 “Dad, ¿why are you driving so fast?”

All of the test tokens were accompanied by a preamble and a photo indicating the action depicted in the context, as shown on the examples (8), (9) and (10). Furthermore, all the test tokens for this specific condition were posed as matrix *wh*-questions. The main reason for this is precisely the fact that it is in questions where Spanish native speakers tend to use the simple present with an ongoing meaning the most. The typical Spanish questions *¿Qué pasa?* (“What’s going on”) or *¿Quién habla?* (“Who is calling?”) support this view. The use of the progressive in these instances is quite odd in Spanish (*¿Quién está hablando?* “Who is calling?”). In fact, they would have a slightly different meaning, encompassing a semantic space that goes beyond the speech time.<sup>5</sup> We believe that organizing the test tokens around questions for the present ongoing condition served as a more target diagnostic of cross-linguistic influence from English.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Elicited production task

Results from the elicited production task showed higher levels of use of the simple present with an ongoing meaning among the L2 learners and the heritage speakers, in contrast to what we expected in hypothesis 1. There were no differences between groups with the simple present with a habitual meaning, as predicted in hypothesis 2. Regarding the use of the present progressive with ongoing meanings, the experimental groups behaved differently from the native speakers confirming hypothesis 3 (HS=29%; L2=69%, NNS= 89%).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, all groups preferred to use the simple present in temporary-habitual contexts, where we expected the progressive to be used. These results are represented in Figure 1 below.

We conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures with group (L2 learners, heritage speakers and controls) as the between subject factor (independent variable) and with verbal form (present, progressive) and situation type (habitual, ongoing) as the within subject factor (dependent factor) to

5. It is unclear to us why questions have this specific semantic restriction with the simple present.

6. All of the progressive ongoing contexts appeared with an adverbial phrase indicating that the event was simultaneous to the moment of speech (*En estos momentos, Lisa está caminando a la escuela* “Lisa is walking to school right now”).



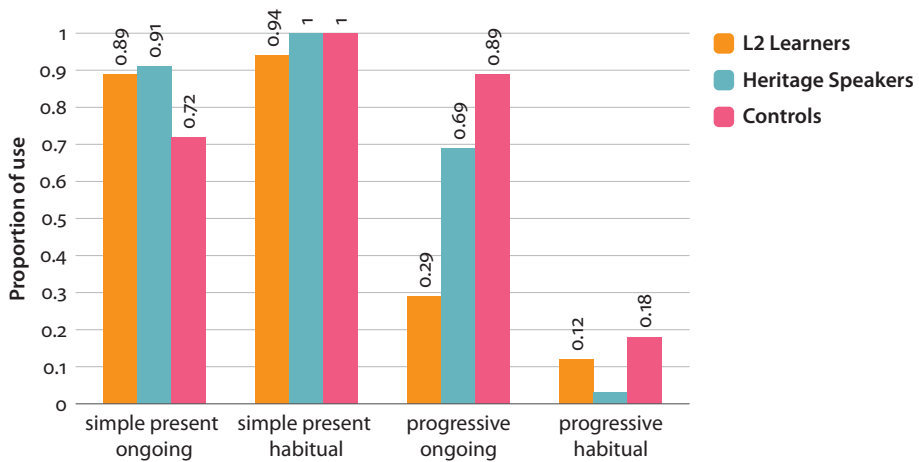


Figure 1. Elicited production task: Mean proportion of use by condition per group

examine the differences per group and condition.<sup>7</sup> Results showed a significant effect per group ( $F(2, 32) = 5.76, p < .007$ ), and a significant interaction between verbal form and situation type ( $F(1.63) = 73.45, p < .0001$ ). Tukey post-hoc tests measuring where the differences lie between groups showed significant differences between the L2 learners and the controls ( $p < .014$ ) and the heritage speakers and the L2 learners ( $p < .025$ ). There were no significant differences between heritage speakers and controls ( $p < .871$ ).

Independent samples t-tests looking at each condition showed significant differences in the simple present with ongoing meaning between the L2 learners and the controls ( $M = 1.39$  vs.  $M = 1.07, t(20) = 2.21, p < .039$ ) and between the heritage speakers and the controls ( $M = 1.41$  vs.  $M = 1.07, t(20) = 2.56, p < .019$ ). In contrast to what was predicted, the L2 learners and the heritage speakers showed higher level of simple present use in ongoing contexts. Furthermore, independent samples t-test showed significant differences between the L2 learners and the native speakers with the progressive ongoing context ( $M = .44$  vs.  $M = 1.34, t(20) = -3.87, p < .001$ ). The heritage speakers showed similar patterns but did not behave significantly different from the controls, as did the L2 learners. In regard to the use of the progressive with a habitual interpretation, most participants including the controls used the simple present.

Although the heritage speakers outperformed the L2 learners in progressive ongoing contexts, overall both groups behaved similarly on this elicited production task, disconfirming hypothesis 4.

7. The proportions realized (1 for expected responses and 0 for the non-expected response) were transformed into arcsine values before running the parametric tests.

## 5.2 Acceptability judgment task

A repeated measures ANOVA on the proportion of responses in the acceptability judgment task revealed no significant differences among groups ( $F(2, 32) = 2.44$ ,  $p = .102$ ), in contrast to what was predicted. The L2 learners and heritage speakers showed knowledge of the simple present with ongoing meaning. However, the L2 learners showed lower levels of acceptance of the progressive form in progressive habitual contexts, compared to heritage speakers and controls ( $M = 3.7$  vs.  $M = 4.5$ ). There was a significant interaction between tense and situation type ( $F(1.44) = 12.34$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), which stems from the differences found between the progressive habitual condition and the rest of the conditions. This is shown in Figure 2 below:

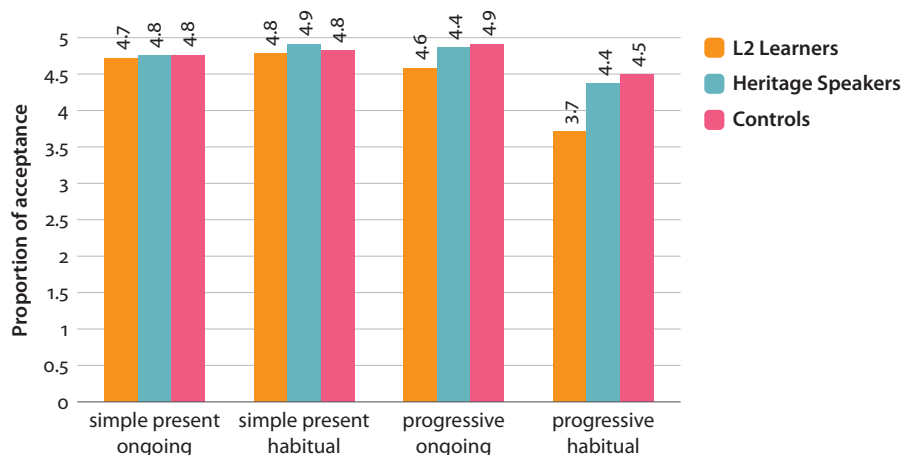


Figure 2. Acceptability judgment task: Mean results per condition and group

It is not surprising that this task did not show any significant differences between groups given that both the simple present and the progressive are grammatically acceptable.

## 5.3 Forced preference task

Results from the forced preference task showed a lower preference rate of the simple present with an ongoing meaning among the L2 learners (58%) and the heritage speakers (52%). There were no differences between groups with the simple present with a habitual meaning, as predicted. Also as predicted, the L2 learners showed less preference for the present progressive with ongoing contexts (75%), in contrast with the heritage speakers (86%) and the controls (100%). They are over-extending the simple present to these contexts, which although not ungrammatical, is less preferred than the progressive. The heritage speakers, however, behaved

closer to the controls, as expected. Regarding the use of the progressive with a habitual meaning, the L2 learners and the heritage speakers behaved differently from the controls, showing much lower levels of preference for the progressive (L2= 17%, HS= 29%, C=60%), as predicted. This is shown in Figure 3:

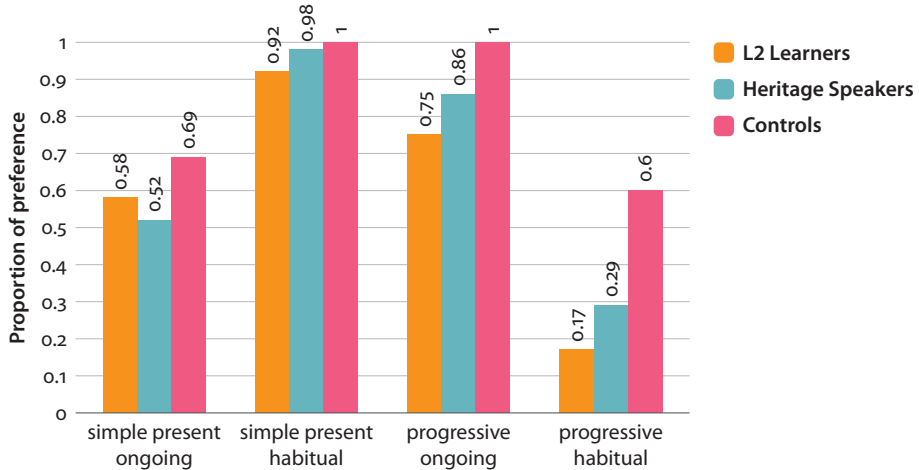


Figure 3. Forced preference task: Mean results per condition and group

A repeated measures ANOVA on the proportion of responses revealed significant differences among groups ( $F(2, 32) = 6.63, p < .004$ ). Results also showed a significant interaction between verbal form and situation type ( $F(2.47) = 35.79, p < .001$ ). Tukey post-hoc tests showed significant differences between the heritage speakers and the controls ( $p < .021$ ) and the L2 learners and the controls ( $p < .004$ ).

Independent samples t-tests showed no significant differences between the two experimental groups and the controls with the simple present with an ongoing meaning (HS-Control,  $p = .214$ ; L2-Control,  $p = .645$ ), disconfirming hypothesis 1. All of the participants preferred the use of the simple present over 50% of the time. Results also showed significant differences between L2 learners and the controls with the progressive ongoing condition ( $M = 1.19$  vs.  $M = 1.57, t(20) = -2.026, p < .05$ ). The L2 learners significantly preferred the simple present rather than the progressive, which suggests lack of sensitivity to the morphosemantic properties of the simple present versus the progressive, in contrast to the heritage speakers. The heritage speakers did not behave significantly different from the controls with the present progressive in ongoing situations ( $M = .486$  vs.  $M = .917, t(20) = -1.822, p = .084$ ), which shows an advantage over the L2 learners. This partially confirms hypothesis 3, and confirms hypothesis 4. The L2 learners also overextended the simple present to progressive habitual conditions, and behaved significantly different from the controls ( $M = .316$  vs.  $M = .917, t(20) = -2.653, p < .01$ ). This was also the case of the L2 learners when compared to the controls ( $M = 1.32$  vs.  $M = 1.57, t(20) = -2.087, p < .05$ ).

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

The goal of the present study was to examine the extent to which L2 learners of Spanish and Spanish heritage speakers have knowledge of the semantic values of the Spanish present tense. For this purpose, we examined the use, intuition and preference of four semantic values related to the simple present and the present progressive. Furthermore, we compared the grammatical representation of L2 learners and heritage speakers with those of native speakers of Spanish. We predicted differences among groups with the simple present with an ongoing meaning (Hypothesis 1). Specifically, we expected the learners to overextend the progressive to these contexts, and show lower levels of use, intuition and preference of the simple present. Furthermore, we expected differences in their use and preference of the present progressive in ongoing and habitual contexts (Hypothesis 3) but no differences with their use, intuition or preference of the simple present in habitual contexts (Hypothesis 2). Finally, if differences between the two groups of learners stem from age-related effects as previously argued, we expected the heritage speakers to outperform the L2 learners.

Results from the production task showed a significant higher use of the simple present in ongoing situations among both experimental groups when compared to the native controls. The L2 learners and the heritage speakers showed ceiling performance (89% and 91% respectively), while the controls were more balanced in their use of the present versus the progressive in the simple present ongoing condition (72%), disconfirming hypothesis 1. *A prima facie*, it seems as if the L2 learners and the heritage speakers have full knowledge of the ongoing representation of the simple present in Spanish, in contrast with previous research (e.g., Cuza, 2008; Klein, 1980; Sánchez-Muñoz, 2004). However, these results have to be taken with caution given that the L2 learners and the heritage speakers also overextended the simple present to the present progressive with an ongoing meaning, where the majority of the native speakers used the present progressive. This was more crucially so among the L2 learners (simple present use by group: L2=71%; HS=31%, Control=11%). Although the simple present in these contexts is not ungrammatical, the entire set of test tokens was introduced by the adverbial phrase *en estos momentos* ("right now"), which makes the simple present less likely to be used. Individual results show that the L2 learners used the simple present in 43/65 trials, the HS in 19/65 trials and the controls in 5/45 trials (11%).<sup>8</sup> It is clear that the L2 learners are overextending the simple present to contexts where the progressive

8. The use of the simple present in this context among the native speakers occurred primarily with the item *En estos momentos, Lisa está cantando/canta en el karaoke* ("Lisa is singing in the karaoke bar right now").

is overwhelming preferred among native speakers, and even among the heritage speakers. This questions whether the L2 learners really have sensitivity to the semantic values of the simple present and are not overextending it across the board.

Furthermore, both experimental groups also showed high level of simple present use in present progressive contexts with a habitual meaning (e.g., *Últimamente, Lisa come mucho helado* “Lisa is eating too much ice cream lately”) (simple present use: L2= 88%; HS=98%; Control=82%). However, the native speakers also showed high levels of simple present use in this condition. Therefore, we can’t conclude that there is an overgeneralization of the simple present in this case. It might be a task effect or a lexical issue. A closer look at the results show that 44% of the native speakers (4/9) used the progressive with the item *Lisa está fumando mucho últimamente* (“Lisa is smoking too much lately”) but much less with the other items which suggest an item effect in this task. However, in this specific item, only 2/13 L2 learners and 1/13 of the heritage speakers used the progressive, which again questions the extent to which the experimental groups are aware of the subtle differences in the use of the simple present versus the progressive.

In regard to the preference task, results showed a slightly different picture compared to the production task. The L2 learners and the heritage speakers were indecisive in their preference of the simple present with a ongoing meaning, choosing it only 58% and 53% of the time, compared with 69% by the native speakers, as expected in hypothesis 1. As in the production task, the L2 learners showed more preference for the simple present in progressive ongoing contexts (25%) than the heritage speakers (14%) and the controls (0%). Although 25% preference for the simple present is not much, what is interesting here is that once again the L2 learners behaved much lower than the heritage speakers and the controls, which suggests an advantage for the heritage speakers, supporting previous research. We do not believe that 25% can be accounted solely on the basis of noise when we look at their overall performance. It appears as if the L2 learners are not quite sure as to when the progressive and the simple present should be used. Furthermore, this view is supported by the result of the progressive habitual condition. In this context, the L2 learners preferred the present tense 83% of the time, and the heritage speakers 71% of the time. The controls also used the simple present in this context but only 40% of the time.

The acceptability judgment task was meant to test the grammatical intuition the participants had of all of the aspectual properties tested. However, this task was crucially geared towards the use of the simple present with an ongoing meaning, the only context where English and Spanish diverge. There were no differences among groups in regard to their grammatical intuition, which is not surprising given that all of the tokens were grammatically acceptable.

Overall, our findings suggest that L2 learners and heritage speakers of Spanish behaved differently in regard to their use and preference of the semantic values of the present tense compared to native speakers. This is evidenced in their inconsistent patterns of use and preference of the simple present with an ongoing meaning, as well as in their preference and use of the simple present in present progressive contexts with ongoing and habitual meanings. The overextension of the simple present in online production and in their preference suggest an morphosemantic convergence toward a less marked and aspectually sensitive form (the simple present). They are overextending the use of the simple present (aspectually less restrictive and morphologically simpler than the progressive) to a semantic space where the progressive is preferred among native speakers.

Furthermore, taking together the results from the production task and the preference task, our data suggest an advantage for the heritage speakers, which supports previous research (Cuza & Frank, 2015; Jia, 1998; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003; Montrul et al., 2008). The L2 learners showed much lower levels of use and preference of the present progressive with an ongoing meaning, compared to the heritage speakers, in cases where the native speakers overwhelmingly preferred the use of the progressive. This was also corroborated by the results of the preference tasks with progressive habitual contexts, where the heritage speakers slightly outperformed the L2 learners in their use of the present progressive (17% vs. 29%). The L2 learners, more so than the heritage speakers, have reorganized their semantic space in a way that differs from native speakers leading to subtle but systematic differences in their use and preference for the simple present versus the progressive. The advantage of the heritage speakers might stem from age-related effects, and crucially the fact that they were all exposed to Spanish from birth and have received more extended exposure to the language. This extended exposure and use seems to have triggered a more native-like representation of the morphosemantic properties of both the simple present and the progressive.

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## Abstract

En el presente estudio examinamos la adquisición de los valores semánticos del presente simple en español por aprendices de español como lengua segunda y heredada, un área todavía por explorar. Predecimos efectos de bilingüismo reflejados en bajos patrones de uso, aceptación y preferencia del presente simple con valor continuo, así como en la preferencia por el presente progresivo en contextos continuos y habituales. Además, anticipamos que los hablantes de herencia superen a los hablantes de segunda lengua y que su comportamiento sea más semejante al de los hablantes nativos. Al contrario de nuestras expectativas, encontramos una sobreextensión del presente simple en contextos continuos y en contextos en los que se prefiere el presente progresivo. Los hablantes de herencia se comportan de manera más semejante a los nativos, lo cual indica la presencia de efectos de edad en el desarrollo del lenguaje. Sostenemos que existe una convergencia morfosemántica hacia la configuración aspectual menos restrictiva.

**Palabras clave:** tiempo y aspecto, tiempo presente en español, adquisición de L2, adquisición del español como lengua de herencia, efectos de edad, efectos de bilingüismo

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