Problems at the syntax/pragmatics interface related to the perception of negated suggestions among learners of L2 Spanish

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Background

Interface Hypothesis:
Sorace & Filiaci (2006) – Evidence that pure syntax is more easily acquired in the L2, while features at the syntax/discourse interface are more difficult to acquire.

Syntax of Negation:
Bosque & Gutiérrez-Rexach (2008) – Spanish negation precedes main verb and auxiliary; English negation placed between auxiliary and main verb.

Pragmatics of Negated Suggestions:
Koike (1994) – Negated suggestion forms have distinct pragmatic force in English and Spanish.

Research Questions

1. Have beginning learners (BL) with L1 English acquired the syntax of negation in L2 Spanish? And advanced learners (AL)?
2. Is there a disconnect between the syntax of negation and the pragmatics of negated suggestions in L2 Spanish among advanced learners?
3. Is there transfer from L1 English to L2 Spanish in the pragmatic interpretation of negated suggestions?

Hypotheses

o Beginning learners (80% with less than two years' experience) will not have completely acquired the syntactic structure of negation, while advanced learners will.
o Advanced learners (with an average of 10 years of study) will not have completely acquired the pragmatics of negated suggestions.
o There will be non-facilitative transfer from the L1 to the L2 in the advanced learners related to the perception of affirmative and negative suggestions.

Study Participants

- **Beginning learners (BL, N=19)**
- **Advanced learners (AL, N=7)**
- **English NS controls (ENS, N=10)**
- **Spanish NS controls (SNS, N=9)**

Study Methods

Completed using Google forms:
1) Linguistic history questionnaire
2) Translation task (TT) – BL and AL translated affirmative suggestions to negated ones.
3) Judgment task (JT) in which BL, AL, ENS, SNS judged forcefulness of negated and affirmative suggestions and stated which suggestion they preferred
- JT Scale: 3 = Very forceful; 2 = Somewhat forceful; 1 = A little forceful; 0 = Not forceful

The acquisitional task

o Koike (1994) analyzed the production of suggestion forms from a corpus of native speakers from Cuernavaca, Mexico and found that they exclusively produce negated interrogative suggestions, as in (1). English, meanwhile, offers both negative and affirmative interrogative suggestion forms as in (2) and (3).
o English negative interrogative suggestions (2) are often perceived as having more force, while Spanish provides only one option for suggestions.

1. ¿No has pensado en leer este libro?
2. Haven't you thought about reading this book?
3. Have you thought about reading this book?

Statistical Results: TT

1 = Negator placed in correct position in L2.
-1 = Negator placed in incorrect position in L2.

Group	BL	AL
Average	.75	1.00
***p* < .001**		

Statistical Results: JT

Judgment Task Sample Question
*ENS – description & options in English
*BL & AL – description in English & options in Spanish
*SNS – description & options in Spanish
(4) Your roommate is trying to decide whether to go to Columbia University or University of Georgia for law school, and is making a list of the pros and cons of each school.
You say to him/her:
Option A: Have you thought about going to visit each university?
Option B: Haven't you thought about going to visit each university?

	Force of A	Force of B	(B - A)	Preference
ENS (μ)	.43	1.49	1.02	.44
BL (μ)	.61	1.31	.69	.53
p-value	.04*	.10	.01*	.27

Table 1. ENS vs. BL

	Force of A	Force of B	(B - A)	Preference
SNS (μ)	1.88	1.92	0	-.07
AL (μ)	.43	.76	.37	.26
p-value	< .001*	< .001*	.09	.03*

Table 2 SNS vs AL

	Force of A	Force of B	(B - A)	Preference
ENS (μ)	.43	1.49	1.02	.44
AL (μ)	.43	.76	.37	.26
p-value	.5	< .001*	.001*	.14

Table 3. ENS vs AL

	Force of A	Force of B	(B - A)	Preference
SNS (μ)	1.88	1.92	0	-.07
BL (μ)	.61	1.31	.69	.53
p-value	< .001*	< .001*	.001*	< .001*

Table 4 SNS vs AL

Findings

- There was a statistically significant difference between beginning and advanced learners on the translation task, indicating that beginning learners have not completely acquired the syntax of negation.
- In the judgment task, English monolinguals identified the negated suggestion as having more force than the affirmative suggestion, as predicted. Monolingual Spanish speakers preferred the negated suggestion more often, in line with Koike's observations.
- Beginning learners exhibit statistically significant differences in all categories of the judgement task, while the advanced speakers were statistically different (*p* < .05) from monolingual Spanish speakers in three of four categories in their judgments of negated suggestions.
- Advanced speakers and English monolinguals rated (A) as having the same forcefulness, while Spanish monolinguals judged (A) as being much more forceful. This indicates the presence of transfer from the L1 in the advanced learners' judgments.
- Confirms the Interface Hypothesis – while advanced learners had acquired the syntax of the negated structures, they had not completely acquired the pragmatic constraints of the negative v. affirmative suggestions in the target language.

Selected references

Bosque, Ignacio, and Javier Gutiérrez-Rexach. 2008. *Fundamentos de Sintaxis Formal.* Madrid: Ediciones AKAL.
Koike, Dale.1994. "Negation in Spanish and English Suggestions and Requests: Mitigating effects?", *Journal of Pragmatics* 21, 513-526.
Sorace, Antonella, and Francesca Filiaci.2006. "Anaphora Resolution in Near-Native Speakers of Italian", *Second Language Research* 22.3, 339-368.