A Processing Study of the Acquisition of the Present Perfect by Arabic learners of English

Gadah Almishwat, Supervised by **Prof Cecile De Cat** and **Dr. Clare Wright**

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Introduction

Study motivation:

The present perfect presents a great challenge for Arabic learners in their acquisition of L2 English temporal and aspectual distinctions, especially the distinction between the present perfect, simple past and simple present.

English

There is a single morpheme used to express the four interpretations of the English present perfect (continuative, experiential, resultative, and recent. Past perfect):

In English, [+past] [+current relevance] context is mapped onto the present perfect, irrespective of the perfectivity of the predicate whether it is telic or atelic predicate.

e.g. Ahmad has lived in Leeds since 1990. (Atelic)
e.g. Mary has bought a table from IKEA just now. (Telic)

Arabic

In Arabic, Current Relevance is not grammaticalised. Events are encoded as Past or Present depending on the telicity of the predicate:

[+ telic] [+ continuative] --> present
[+ telic] [+ recent. Past] --> past
[- telic] [+ continuative] --> past
[- telic] [+ recent. Past] --> present

Background

### L2 theories of the acquisition of tense and aspect

Feature Reassembly Hypothesis serves as the framework of this research study.
It is one of the hypotheses proposed in SLA research to understand the mapping difficulties that learners face in their L2 acquisition.

Feature Reassembly H (Lardiere ,2012) explains L1 influence on SLA with respect to functional morphology. It predicts that successful L2 acquisition requires reassembling L2 features that already exist in the L1 into new functional categories or lexical items.
The reassembly process might not occur if it is obscured by L1 grammar.

Methodology

Study 2: Forced-choice task

Forced-choice task was conducted to explore what forms do the Arabic learners of English use in the contexts where the English native speakers are expecting to choose the present perfect at different levels of L2 English proficiency.

The Results

Telicity predictor effect plot
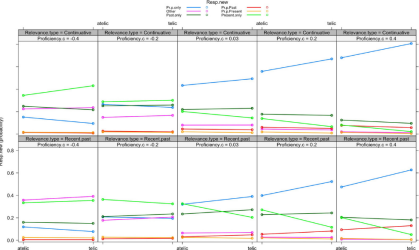
- The participants of the advanced and high intermediate groups of English proficiency tended to use the Pr. perfect form in many cases especially with telic predicates in the continuative and Recent. Past present perfect contexts. However, they allowed some non-target like responses in other cases such as in:
  [- telic] [+ recent. Past] --> present.

- The results from Study 2 showed probability of negative transfer from L1 Arabic, where the participants, especially those participants of low level of L2 English proficiency, tended to over- use Present.only in all cases especially in the following context:
  [+ telic] [+ continuative] --> present
  [- telic] [+ recent. Past] --> present.

- This negative transfer from L1 Arabic seems to appear more among participants with low levels of L2 English Proficiency and declines with participants at higher levels of English proficiency.

Methodology

Study 3: Truth value judgement task.
Aim of Study 3:
- To probe the participants' interpretation of the English present perfect contexts rather their acceptability.
- To understand the interaction between telicity and Relevance type context of the present perfect (over the course of development).
- To test the impact of telicity on the presence and strength of the continuous relevance interpretation of the English present perfect in two interpretations: (continuative vs. Recent past)

Research Questions for study 3:

1.How Arabic learners of English interpret the meanings of continuous relevance of the present perfect (Continuative vs. Recent. past)?

2.To what extent does the manipulation of Telicity affect the presence and strength of the continuous relevance interpretation of the English present perfect among native speakers & nan-native speakers of English?

3.Does the difference in the level of L2 English proficiency affect the comprehension and interpretation of the continuative vs. Recent. Past perfect contexts among Arabic learners of English?

Predictions

- It is predicated that Telicity can affect the participants' interpretation of the meanings of continuous relevance of the present perfect (Continuative vs. Recent. past).
- A facilitation in processing and understanding the continuative contexts with atelic predicates rather than with telic predicates, because the continuative contexts of the present perfect have stronger relevance to the current moment of the event.
- A facilitation in processing and understanding the recent past perfect contexts with telic predicates rather than with atelic predicates, because the recent past contexts of the present perfect have weaker relevance to the current moment of the event.
- Participants will differ in their comprehension and interpretation of the continuative vs. Recent. Past perfect contexts according to the difference in their level of L2 English proficiency.

Procedures:

- Native and non-native speakers will be invited to take part in this experiment by using online tool (PsychoPy software).
- Arabic learners will be presented with a subset of the Standardized Oxford Proficiency test to test their L2 English proficiency level.
- The task in this experiment is truth value judgement task in which the participants will be asked to judge their agreement for a statement that describes the relation of the event of the statement to the current relevance.
- The task will be presented as involving 2 people: Sara saying the first sentence, and the second one saying how John interpreted that sentence. Then the participant would be asked: is John likely to be correct, as the following examples:

CONTINUATIVE: (testing for the ongoing interpretation of the current relevance)

ATELIC
- Sara says: Sylvia and Mary have been friends.
- John concludes: Sylvia and Mary are still friends now.
- Is the interpretation of John, valid?
  Yes/No
- How certain are you?
  4-point scale (completely certain / quite certain / not very certain / not certain at all)

TELIC
- Sara says: Ali has published two books.
- John concludes: Ali is still publishing two books now.
- Is the interpretation of John, valid?
  Yes/No
- How certain are you?
  4-point scale (completely certain / quite certain / not very certain / not certain at all)

RECENT PAST: (testing for that interpretation of the current relevance)

ATELIC
- Sara says: Sylvia and Mary have been friends.
- John concludes: Sylvia and Mary were friends until very recently.
- Is the interpretation of John, valid?
  Yes/No
- How certain are you?
  4-point scale (completely certain / quite certain / not very certain / not certain at all)

TELIC
- Sara says: Ali has published two books.
- John concludes: Ali published the two books very recently.
- Is the interpretation of John, valid?
  Yes/No
- How certain are you?
  4-point scale (completely certain / quite certain / not very certain / not certain at all)

Material:

Relevance type	Atelic Activity	State	Atelic Total	Telic Accomplishment	Achievement	Telic Total
Continuative	5	5	10	5	5	10
Recent Past	5	5	10	5	5	10

2 (relevance context) x 2 (Telicity) x 2 (aktionsart)
10 items per condition --> 10*4=40 critical items
10 items for continuative+telic condition
10 items for continuative+atelic condition
10 items for Recent.past +telic condition
10 items for Recent.past+atelic condition

The 40 critical items will be divided into two lists.
each list will contain 20 critical items and 20 distractors.
The same distractors will be used across lists.

References: Lardiere, D. 2012. Linguistic approaches to second language morphosyntax. In: Gass, S.M. and Mackey, A. eds. The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition. London: Routledge, pp.106-126.