

Aspects of Agreement: Evidence that Agreement Morphology and Aspectual Distinctions Are Acquired Independently by Child L2 Learners*

Tania Ionin
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

1. Introduction

Children and adults who learn a second language (L2) frequently omit agreement morphology in their speech. Multiple proposals have been put forth to account for the syntactic and semantic properties of those uninflected forms. A recent proposal by Gavruseva (2000) has tied the occurrence of uninflected forms in L2 English to their aspectual interpretation. The present paper examines this proposal using data obtained from a group of L1-Russian children acquiring English as an L2. I argue against Gavruseva's proposal and show that acquisition of inflectional morphology and appropriate aspectual distinctions are two separate processes at work in L2 acquisition. I suggest that the aspectual interpretation of verbs in L2 English is best accounted for by a default (or transferred) setting of the perfectivity feature, as well as by discourse strategies of aspectual use.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly describes the aspectual systems of English and Russian. Section 3 reviews Gavruseva's proposal for aspect in L2 acquisition. Section 4 presents the relevant data and analyses, and Section 5 concludes the paper and gives some suggestions for further research.

2. Aspectual Systems of English and Russian

One of the tasks facing L2 learners is acquiring the aspectual system of their new language. It is possible that the learners may transfer the aspectual distinctions of their L1 onto the L2. The following is a brief summary of the aspectual systems of Russian and English, the respective L1 and L2 of the learners described in this paper.

2.1 Aspect in English

English differs from many European languages (including other Germanic languages) in that its eventive present-tense verbs cannot have a continuous interpretation. Thus, (1a) cannot refer to a continuous, ongoing event of John eating an apple. Parallel sentences in languages such as

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Italian or German, on the other hand, can refer to ongoing events. Giorgi and Pianesi (1997) argue that English, but not German or Italian, has a [+perf] ([+perfective]) feature on all eventive predicates. A [+perf] feature on a verb means that the event denoted by the verb is a closed, completed event. On the other hand, the continuous ongoing event is by definition not completed – hence the impossibility of that interpretation.

- (1) a. John eats an apple
 b. $e\ t\ x(\text{eat}(e)\ \text{Theme}(e, x)\ \text{apple}(x)\ \text{Agent}(e, \text{John})\ \text{Cl}(e)\ t\ S\ \text{at}(t, e))$

Giorgi and Pianesi (1997: 165) give (1b) as the logical form for (1a) and state that “the truth conditions for (0a) require that there is a closed event of eating, due to the presence of [+perf], which is simultaneous with speech time.” However, as Giorgi and Pianesi point out, a closed event is incompatible with speech time, which makes (1b) uninterpretable.

Thus, present-tense English verbs cannot receive either ongoing or perfective interpretations. The only possible interpretation for (1a) is that of a habitual. Giorgi and Pianesi, building on the proposal of Chierchia (1995), argue that habituals and statives are possible in English present tense because instead of a [+perf] feature they have a quantificational feature which is associated with a generic operator. Thus, a sentence such as (2) is true “iff for generically many times t which are part of the contextually relevant interval I , where I contains the speech event, there is an event of smoking occurring at t ” (Giorgi and Pianesi 1997: 168).

- (2) John smokes

By contrast, past-tense verbs in English are able to refer to ongoing eventualities. Thus, (3) can mean either that John engaged in a continuous action of eating an apple (an unbounded, [-perf] reading) or that John completed the action of eating an apple (a bounded, [+perf] reading)¹.

- (3) John ate an apple

2.2 *Aspect in Russian*

In Russian, aspect is morphologically marked on the verb, and all verbs can appear in the perfective or imperfective aspect. Infinitival forms exist both in the perfective and the imperfective (except for the verb “to be”, which is only imperfective).

Smith and Rappaport (1997) define the aspectual distinctions of Russian as a choice between perfective and imperfective viewpoints. The perfective “includes both endpoints of dynamic situations” (p. 227) while the imperfective excludes both endpoints. This contrast is illustrated in (4).

- (4) a. Masha *ela* sup
 Mary *eat-past-imp* soup

¹ Giorgi and Pianesi never actually say that the [+perf] feature is associated only with present-tense verbs in English, stating instead that it is associated with all eventive predicates in English. Given the possibility of an imperfective interpretation of past tense in English, however, and given that Giorgi and Pianesi’s analysis of the [+perf] feature in English is limited to present-tense verbs, I will assume the [+perf] feature only for present-tense English verbs.

- b. Masha s'ela sup
Mary eat-past-perf soup

Past-tense verbs can be either perfective or imperfective in Russian. In (4a), the imperfective aspect of the verb places emphasis on the process of eating. The meaning of (4a) is close to “Mary was engaged in the process of eating soup.” In the perfective case, (4b), the emphasis is on the endpoint – the meaning expressed by (4b) can be “Mary ate the soup (till there was no more left).”

In non-past tense, both perfective and imperfective viewpoints are also available, but have different temporal interpretations. The non-past imperfective refers to the present tense (5a), while the non-past perfective refers to the future tense (5b). It is also possible to express the imperfective viewpoint in the future tense, but this requires an imperfective form of *byt'* (be) followed by the infinitival form of the verb (5c).

- (5) a. Masha est sup
Mary eats-imp soup
b. Masha s'est sup
Mary eats-perf soup
c. Masha budet est' sup
Mary be-imp eat-inf soup

Russian makes no morphological distinctions between habitual and ongoing interpretations. Thus, (5a) can mean either “Mary is eating soup (right now)” or “Mary eats soup (every day)”. I turn next to aspect in L2 acquisition.

3. Aspect in L2 Acquisition: Gavrusseva's Proposal

Gavrusseva (2000) proposed that there is a relationship between finiteness and aspect in L2 acquisition. She suggested that finite forms in early L2 English are restricted in their aspectual interpretation.

Gavrusseva (2000) analyzed longitudinal production data of an 8-year-old L1-Russian child, Dasha, who was acquiring English as an L2. Looking at the aspectual interpretation of Dasha's verbs, Gavrusseva found an interesting pattern. The bare, uninflected forms in Dasha's data had a variety of aspectual interpretations – they referred to bounded, unbounded, ongoing, and habitual eventualities. Dasha's use of bare forms to refer to present-tense, ongoing eventualities led Gavrusseva to suggest that Dasha allowed the [+imperfective] feature to be associated with bare forms. Gavrusseva suggested that this is possible transfer from Russian, where verbal stems can be marked either perfective or imperfective.

At the same time, Gavrusseva found that all of the inflected forms in Dasha's data were in the past tense and were perfective, eventive verbs. Gavrusseva suggested, based on this finding, that Dasha used past tense morphology to encode perfectivity.

There are at least two questions that are left unanswered by this proposal. The first concerns the use of past tense morphology to mark perfectivity. Both Russian and English allow perfective as well as imperfective uses of past tense verbs – in fact, as described above, Russian uses morphologically distinct forms for the two types of the past tense. Why should Dasha use the past tense exclusively with perfective aspect in her L2? One possibility, suggested by Gavrusseva, is

that past tense morphology is originally used to mark perfectivity. Another alternative, however, is that perfective use of the past tense is *in general* more common than imperfective (due perhaps to discourse strategies). The only way to check this hypothesis would be to compare the aspectual interpretation of inflected past-tense forms in Dasha's speech to that of bare forms used in past-tense contexts. While Gavrusseva notes that Dasha sometimes uses bare forms to refer to unbounded eventualities in the past tense, she does not say how frequent this phenomenon is. In order to truly examine the connection between aspectual interpretation and finiteness marking, we would need to know how often bare vs. inflected forms are used in [-perf] contexts.

The second question concerns the acquisition of third person *-s*. Gavrusseva reports two interesting phenomena of Dasha's speech: first, that there are no third person *-s* forms in Dasha's first six months of acquisition; second, that Dasha uses bare forms in present-tense contexts to refer to ongoing as well as habitual eventualities. The conclusion that Gavrusseva draws from this is that the lack of inflection on bare forms allows them to be marked [-perf]. This would predict that once third person *-s* forms emerge in Dasha's data, they should never be used in [-perf] contexts. This prediction cannot, however, be tested using Dasha's data, since no third person *-s* forms are present.

4. Aspect in L2 Acquisition: More Data from L1-Russian Children

To summarize, Gavrusseva's analysis of Dasha's data leaves open two questions: 1) is there a difference in aspectual interpretation between inflected and bare forms in past-tense contexts? and 2) is emergence of 3rd person *-s* tied to acquisition of the [+perf] feature? I examined these two questions using a corpus of production data obtained from children who, like Dasha, are L1-Russian learners of English.

4.1 The Corpus

The data for the present analysis come from 14 L1-Russian children ranging in age from 5;3 to 13;10. These data were obtained between 1997 and 1999, while the children resided either in Michigan or in Boston with their families. The children were recorded during spontaneous conversation and/or story-telling activities. Either one or two speech recordings were obtained from each child, for a total of 21 transcripts. No child had lived in the U.S. for longer than 18 months at the time that recordings of that child's speech were made. Specific learner descriptions given in Table 1.²

² The learner descriptions are sorted by increasing length of exposure to English (last column). This is not necessarily equal to length of residence in the U.S. (fourth column). For instance, R.O. and D.I. had studied English while still Russia; on the other hand, D.A. and A.T. were not exposed to English during their first few months of U.S. residence. A.N. and D.I. are siblings, and so are M.Y. and O.L. It should be noted that M.Y. and O.L. were adopted by an English-speaking family and therefore received more intensive exposure to English than the other children, who resided with their Russian-speaking parents.

Child	Sex	age (years;months) during 1 st (and, if applicable, 2 nd) recording sessions	length of residence in the U.S. prior to 1 st recording	approximate length of exposure to English prior to 1 st recording
T.I.	M	11;11	1 month	1 month
A.Y.	F	10;1 and 10;4	2 & 5 months	2 & 5 months
M.A.	F	7;4 and 7;5	3 & 4 months	3 & 4 months
D.A.	F	9;7 and 9;9	6 & 8 months	3 & 5 months
K.I.	M	6;5 and 6;7	4 & 6 months	4 & 6 months
V.A.	M	9;6 and 9;8	5 & 7 months	5 & 7 months
A.T.	F	6;2	8 months	5 months
M.Y.	F	5;3 and 5;5	5 & 7 months	5 & 7 months
O.L.	F	6;10 and 7;0	5 & 7 months	5 & 7 months
R.O.	M	13;10	2 months	2 months (+ ~1 year in Russia)
T.O.	F	7;8	11 months	11 months
V.I.	M	8;1	12 months	12 months
A.N.	F	10;1	18 months	18 months
D.I.	M	11;9	18 months	18 months (+ <1 year in Russia)

TABLE 1. Learner descriptions.

Each transcript was coded for presence of overt inflectional morphology on the lexical verbs, as well as for aspectual interpretation. Coding for aspectual interpretation relied on the context surrounding the utterance.

4.2 Bare Forms in L2 Data

As expected, production of bare forms in place of inflected forms (both 3rd person present tense singular and past tense contexts) was very high across learners. Combining numbers across all transcripts, it was found that in the present tense, a bare form was used in place of a 3rd person singular form in 207 utterances, which constituted 78% of all obligatory contexts. In the past tense, a bare form was used in place of an inflected (regular or irregular) form in 226 utterances, 52% of all obligatory contexts. There was also some use of bare forms with a future interpretation – of the 27 obligatory contexts for future tense use, 13 (48%) involved a bare verb forms without the *will* auxiliary.

4.3 Aspectual Interpretation of Present Tense in L2 Data

A first look at the L2 learners' use of present-tense morphology suggests support for Gavrusseva's hypothesis. As Table 2 shows, most ongoing activities were referred to with bare forms, whereas finite 3rd person singular forms were more likely to be used with habituais or statives. Some examples are given in (6)³.

³ Throughout this paper, each example utterance is preceded by the child's name.

<i>aspectual interpretation</i>	bare forms	finite verbs (with -s)
ongoing	107 (91%)	10 (9%)
habitual	38 (67%)	19 (33%)
stative	62 (67%)	31 (33%)

TABLE 2. Aspectual interpretation in the present tense (3rd person sing. contexts only).

- (6)
- a. *ongoing activity with bare form*
D.A.: “girl play with toy”
 - b. *ongoing activity with inflected form*
A.N.: “mermaid talks to her father” [describing ongoing action in a picture]
 - c. *habitual activity with bare form*
A.Y.: “my mom spell for me Russian letter”
 - d. *habitual activity with inflected form*
O.L.: “Mary sometimes sings songs really loud”
 - e. *stative verb, bare form*
V.A.: “the boy want to give some nuts to the squirrel”
 - f. *stative verb, inflected form*
M.Y.: “she lives under the bed”

Does this mean that use of 3rd person -s in fact entails the appropriate setting of the perfectivity feature? A more detailed look at the data shows this not to be the case. The high proportion of bare forms among verbs used to describe ongoing activities appears instead to be due to an interaction between two independent processes: emergence of 3rd person singular morphology, and acquisition of appropriate aspectual distinctions. Consider individual learner breakdowns in Table 3⁴.

CHILD	overall % of 3 rd person singular -s used in obligatory contexts	% of -s forms used to refer to ongoing events (over all instances of -s use)	% of bare forms used to refer to ongoing events (over all instances of bare form use in 3 rd person singular contexts)
T.I.	0% (0/18)	n/a	89% (16/18)
A.Y.	15% (7/47)	43% (3/7)	13% (5/40)
M.A.	3% (1/31)	100% (1/1)	100% (30/30)
D.A.	2% (1/43)	0% (0/1)	67% (28/42)
K.I.	30% (3/10)	0% (0/3)	0% (0/7)
V.A.	17% (6/35)	50% (3/6)	63% (20/29)
M.Y.	77% (10/13)	0% (0/10)	0% (0/3)
O.L.	69% (20/29)	0% (0/20)	0% (0/9)
R.O.	33% (2/6)	0% (0/2)	0% (0/4)
T.O.	33% (3/9)	0% (0/3)	0% (0/6)
A.N.	27% (3/11)	67% (2/3)	63% (5/8)
D.I.	37% (4/7)	25% (1/4)	0% (0/3)

TABLE 3. Individual breakdowns in the use of present-tense forms.

⁴ A.T. and V.I., who had fewer than five obligatory context for s production, are excluded from Table 3.

The learners in Table 3, who are arranged by increasing length of exposure to English, can be divided into three distinct groups based on the pattern of 3rd person *-s* production and use of appropriate aspect. Three learners (who names are in italics) produce almost no *-s*; therefore, we cannot say anything about aspectual interpretation of inflected forms in their data. Their bare forms are used predominantly to refer to ongoing eventualities. Note that those three subjects are among the least advanced, clustering towards the top of the table. We thus know that the least advanced subjects (just like Gavrusseva's Dasha) (a) produce no *-s* forms and (b) misuse bare forms to refer to ongoing eventualities. In fact, the high number of bare forms used for ongoing eventualities (cf. Table 2) comes largely from these three learners.

Consider the next group of three learners (whose names are in bold): these learners produce some *-s* forms (though still a fairly low percentage). They are also quite likely to use *both* bare and inflected forms to refer to ongoing eventualities. While the numbers are very small, they point towards an interesting pattern: when L2 learners begin using *-s*, they are just as likely to misuse *-s* forms as bare forms to refer to ongoing eventualities. The three learners have varied lengths of exposure to English, so it is impossible to say anything about effects of length of exposure on acquisition of aspectual distinctions⁵.

The third group (the learners whose names are in regular font) consists of learners who still have not fully mastered *-s* production (with production in obligatory contexts ranging from 30% to 77%), but who apparently have set the [+perf] feature on English verbs. These learners no longer use either bare or inflected forms to refer to ongoing events. Note that, with one exception, these six learners cluster towards the lower half of the table – i.e., these are the L2 learners with generally lengthier or more intensive English exposure.

What can be concluded from these data? Despite fairly small numbers, the data indicate a clear pattern. With limited exposure to English, L2 learners make two types of errors: they omit 3rd person singular *-s*, and they use present-tense forms to refer to ongoing events.⁶ As their L2 proficiency increases, the learners start producing *-s* and continue to use present-tense forms (with or without *-s*) to refer to ongoing events. With even more exposure to English, the learners master the aspectual distinctions of English and use both inflected and uninflected forms only in habitual and stative contexts; however, even those more advanced learners still continue to omit *-s* in obligatory contexts. Importantly, there is no learner who consistently uses bare forms to refer to ongoing events, but uses *-s* forms only with habituals and statives.

These findings suggest that *-s* production and acquisition of the [+perf] feature are not directly related. Both emerge as proficiency in the L2 increases, with the [+perf] feature being set

⁵ L2 acquisition is subject to individual variation, and length of exposure may not be the best indicator of proficiency: for example, of the three children in the “bold” group, two – A.Y. and V.A. – had fairly short exposure to English but were extremely social; the third, A.N., despite fairly lengthy exposure to English, was very shy and tended to avoid interaction with English speakers, which may have delayed her acquisition process. The exact interaction between such social/motivational factors and speed of L2 acquisition is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶ The use of present-tense forms with ongoing eventualities did not result from lack of mastery of the progressive *ing* form: all of the children have high production of *ing* forms in their data. Interested readers are referred to Ionin and Wexler (to appear) for the exact data and discussion.

before affixal morphology becomes fully productive. This means that the lack of *-s* in obligatory contexts cannot be attributed to lack of a [+perf] feature. Instead, I would like to suggest that *all* present-tense verbs in English (regardless of presence of inflection) are initially marked [-perf] by L2 learners. This would not be very surprising considering that Russian lacks a [+perf] feature on present-tense verbs. The L2 learners could be transferring the [-perf] setting from their L1 to their L2. Alternatively, the [-perf] setting could be a default of L2 acquisition regardless of the specific L1. In order to choose between these alternatives, we would need to look at data from other combinations of L1's and L2's.

4.4 Aspectual Interpretation of Past Tense in L2 Data

The previous section argued that lack of inflection in L2-English is not responsible for a [-perf] setting on the verb. This section approaches the problem from the other end, arguing that presence of (past-tense) inflection does not entail a [+perf] feature setting on the verb.

Looking at the data of all the L2 learners together, we see that both inflected and bare past-tense forms are used in perfective contexts. As Table 4 shows, 70% of bare forms and 86% of finite forms have a perfective interpretation. Some examples are given in (7).

<i>aspectual interpretation</i>	bare forms	finite verbs
imperfective/unbounded	33 (15%)	16 (8%)
perfective/bounded	159 (70%)	180 (86%)
unclear	15 (7%)	0
stative ⁷	19 (8%)	14 (7%)

TABLE 4. Aspectual interpretation and finiteness in the past tense.

- (7)
- a. *bounded event with bare form*
M.Y.: he turn a girl into a bear
"He turned a girl into a bear"
 - b. *bounded event with inflected form*
M.A.: he ran home
 - c. *unbounded event with bare form*
Investigator: what did you do over vacation?
K.I.: I go to the park with the dog
"I went to the park with the dog"
 - d. *unbounded event with inflected form*
Investigator: tell me where you went over Christmas break... what type of things did you do?
V.A.: I went snowboarding

⁷ Statives are grouped as a separate category for two reasons. First of all (as Smith and Rappaport point out), statives in Russian are always imperfective. Even though a verb such as *want* in Russian can be morphologically either perfective or imperfective, in its perfective form it no longer expresses a state: it has the meaning of "beginning to want something" – it no longer expresses the *state* of wanting. When the L2 learners use verbs such as *want* in the past tense, it is generally impossible to tell which meaning they have in mind. The second reason for separate grouping of statives is the fact that Gavruseva's L2 learner, Dasha, used past tense morphology only with perfective *eventive* predicates.

The numbers in Table 4 suggest that the L2 learners use perfective past tense more often than the imperfective. While finite forms are somewhat more likely than bare forms to be perfective, this effect does not appear meaningful. Individual learner breakdowns are given in Table 5.⁸

CHILD	overall % of past tense forms used in obligatory contexts	% of past tense forms used to refer to bounded events (over all instances of past tense use)	% of bare forms used to refer to bounded past-tense events (over all instances of bare form use in the past tense)
A.Y.	34% (21/62)	91% (19/21)	61% (25/41)
M.A.	92% (22/24)	100% (22/22)	100% (2/2)
D.A.	22% (13/58)	54% (7/13)	47% (21/45)
K.I.	42% (14/33)	86% (12/14)	63% (12/19)
V.A.	71% (58/82)	81% (47/58)	96% (23/24)
A.T.	16% (4/25)	75% (3/4)	76% (16/21)
M.Y.	64% (27/42)	85% (23/27)	93% (14/15)
O.L.	46% (19/41)	95% (18/19)	77% (17/22)
R.O.	50% (5/10)	80% (4/5)	60% (3/5)
T.O.	30% (12/40)	92% (11/12)	82% (23/28)
V.I.	60% (2/5)	100% (2/2)	67% (2/3)
A.N.	87% (7/8)	100% (7/7)	100% (1/1)

TABLE 5. Individual breakdowns in the use of past-tense forms.

Table 5 shows that all of the learners have a general preference for referring to bounded (rather than unbounded) events in the past tense, regardless of presence of inflection. Some learners are somewhat more likely to use inflected forms as perfectives, while others are more likely to use bare forms as perfectives.

The general preference for talking about bounded rather than unbounded events in the past tense may best be attributed to a discourse strategy, not to any process particular to L2 acquisition. In fact, Brun, Avrutin and Babyonyshev (1999) found that young children acquiring Russian as an L1 used the perfective form of the past tense in 68% of all past-tense contexts in which a finite verb (rather than a root infinitive) was used. This was not a phenomenon specific to children: Brun et al. similarly found that Russian-speaking adults whose speech was recorded in the same transcripts used the perfective past-tense forms in 64% of all past-tense contexts. There is thus reason to believe that children as well as adults are more likely to talk about bounded past-tense events than about unbounded ones.

While Russian encodes this distinction morphologically, there is no reason to believe that Russian speakers are unique in having a preference for talking about bounded events. Rather, this may be a general property of discourse: completed (bounded) events are related to the “here and now” (Giorgi and Pianesi 1997), since the right boundary of the completed event is “anchored” in

⁸ Two learners, D.I. and T.I., are excluded from Table 5 due to having fewer than five obligatory contexts for past tense use.

the present tense (Enç 1987). On the other hand, unbounded events in the past tense are not as directly related to the “here and now,” which may account for the relative infrequency of imperfective past-tense verbs in everyday speech.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined Gavrusseva’s (2000) proposal for the role of aspect in L2 acquisition of verbal morphology, using a corpus of data from L1-Russian children acquiring English as an L2. These L2 data suggest that, contrary to Gavrusseva’s proposal, acquisition of verbal morphology and emergence of aspectual distinctions are two parallel but most likely independent processes in L2 acquisition. Neither third person *-s* nor past tense morphology is directly related to a perfectivity feature⁹. Instead, it was suggested that L2 learners approach English with general discourse strategies as well as a transferred (or default) [-perf] setting on the present tense. The [+perf] feature is apparently acquired before the affixal agreement paradigm of English is fully mastered.

In order to explore more fully exactly what drives the acquisition of aspectual distinctions in the L2, it would be productive to look at other L1/L2 combinations. For instance, do L1-English learners of another language transfer the [+perf] setting of English present-tense verbs onto their L2? Or do they start out with a (default) [-perf] setting? Another direction for further research would be to look at L1 learners of English to see whether they also initially use present-tense verbs to refer to ongoing eventualities¹⁰ – if they do, this may be additional evidence that [-perf] is a default setting.

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⁹ For a discussion of why the L1-Russian learners of English omit agreement morphology in their speech, see Ionin and Wexler (to appear).

¹⁰ There is in fact some evidence for this possibility. Hoekstra and Hyams (1998: 93) report that Ud Deen (1997) found most uninflected forms in early L1-English referring to the present tense, “with the present tense here-and-now interpretation being the most frequent.”

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