

# THE ACQUISITION OF ANTICAUSATIVE STRUCTURES BY L1 SPANISH SPEAKERS LEARNING L2 ENGLISH

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**Lexico-syntactic properties.** English and Spanish anticausative structures share lexico-syntactic properties. Most verbs of change of state in these languages enter into the causative alternation, the so-called “transitive alternating verbs” (1-2). Verbs of external causation (*break/romper*) can appear in intransitive configuration (1b, 2b). This possibility has been related to the fact that the causer of the events encoded by these verbs is not necessarily an animate agent (3), and, therefore, it can be left unspecified. However, not all transitive verbs can have intransitive/anticausative counterparts. Verbs like *cut/cortar* can be transitive, but not intransitive (4-5). The causer of the event denoted by these verbs is necessarily an animate agent that cannot be left unspecified, which renders the intransitive form unacceptable. These are known as “transitive non-alternating verbs”.

**Morpho-syntactic properties.** English and Spanish anticausative forms are different in their morphological marking. In Spanish, the reflexive pronoun *se* is used (2b), but, in English, there is no morphological marking (1b). Alexiadou et al. (2006, 2015) propose that the difference in morphological marking reflects a difference in syntactic structure, but not in meaning in anticausative structures in these languages. The lack of morphological marking reflects the absence of VoiceP in these structures in English, whereas *se* signals the presence of an expletive VoiceP in Spanish inchoatives, i.e. presence of morphology with no semantic contribution.

**Previous L2 studies.** Montrul (1997) tested L1 Spanish speakers learning L2 English at the intermediate level. They marginally incorrectly rejected anticausative sentences with alternating verbs (1b), and correctly rejected them with non-alternating ones (4b). This was considered transfer of L1 morphological properties, i.e. modular transfer, and not of full transfer, since anticausative sentences in English and Spanish are different in their morphology, but not in their lexico-syntactic structure. However, the syntactic analysis underlying the predictions and the analysis in the study assumed that English and Spanish anticausatives had the same syntactic structure.

**Predictions.** We hypothesize that the properties of the L1 determine which verb classes will be allowed in the intransitive/anticausative configuration in the interlanguage. We predict that:

(a) If only lexico-syntactic properties are transferred, L1 Spanish learners of L2 English will accept transitive alternating verbs in the intransitive form, and reject non-alternating ones.

(b) If only morpho-syntactic properties are transferred, L1 Spanish learners of L2 English will reject all intransitive sentences due to the absence of expletive VoiceP (i.e. lack of *se*), and will correct these sentences to express expletive VoiceP.

If there is full transfer:

(c) Transitive alternating and non-alternating verbs will be rejected, but for different reasons: the former due to the absence of VoiceP (equivalent to *se*), and the later due to lexico-syntactic properties.

**Experiment.** 76 L1 Spanish/L2 English college level L2-learners were tested in Lima, Perú. A picture-based acceptability judgment test was used to elicit learners’ responses. Learners were instructed to provide a corrected version of sentences that they rated negatively. Prediction (a) held for all proficiency levels since learners’ means for alternating verbs were significantly higher than those for non-alternating ones for all levels of proficiency. Prediction (b) did not hold for any specific level of proficiency according to the group analysis. The sentence correction analysis revealed that morpho-syntactic and lexico-syntactic transfer interacted at higher proficiency as learners who incorrectly rejected English anticausatives with alternating

unaccusatives tended to correct them using the Spanish passive for (*ser* + past participle). Full transfer seems to be conditioned by development of L2 competency. Given the L1 transfer effects found, the L1 Spanish / L2 English data provides evidence in favor of the view that English and Spanish anticausatives with alternating unaccusatives are different in syntactic structure and not only on morphological marking.

### Examples.

- (1) a. The thief broke the window.  
b. The window broke.
- (2) a. El ladrón rompió la ventana.  
b. La ventana se rompió.
- (3) a. The wind broke the window.  
b. El viento rompió la ventana.
- (4) a. Patricia cut the meat.  
b. \*The meat cut.
- (5) a. Patricia cortó la carne.  
b. \*La carne se cortó.

### References

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