

State–non state difference in Dutch L2 acquisition of English

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1. Introduction

Both English and Dutch are considered Sequence of Tense languages. A Sequence of Tense language has the ability to express a simultaneous reading with a (simple) past tense, e.g. an utterance, as in (1b) in which a present tense is used, can be reported on by using a simple past tense, as in (1a). This construction is sometimes referred to as the past-under-past. The same holds for the Dutch examples in (2). There is simultaneity between the eventualities.¹

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|-----|----|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| (1) | a. | Mary said that she was happy. | |
| | b. | Mary: “I am happy.” | <i>simultaneous</i> |
| | c. | Mary: “I was happy.” | <i>real past</i> |
| (2) | a. | Marie zei dat ze gelukkig was. | |
| | b. | Marie: “Ik ben gelukkig.” | <i>simultaneous</i> |
| | c. | Marie: “Ik was gelukkig.” | <i>real past</i> |

The eventualities in the complement clauses in (1) and (2) are states. For both English and Dutch there is no difference between states. However, there is a difference between Dutch and English with respect to non states. In this case there is no simultaneity between the event of the main clause and the complement clause. A simple past tense on an English non-states in a complement clause, as in (3a), only has a real past reading. The example in (3a) can only be a report of (3b) and not of (3c).

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|-----|----|--|--|
| (3) | a. | Mary said that she ate John’s sandwich. | |
| | b. | Mary: “I ate John’s sandwich.” | |
| | c. | Mary: “I am eating/is eating John’s sandwich.” | |

The difference between states and non-states in English does not exist in Dutch. The eventuality in the Dutch complement clause in (4a) is a non-state. Unlike English, this sentence can be a report of either the present tense case in (4b), or the past

tense case in (4c). This means that (4a) can have either a simultaneous reading or a real past reading.

- (4) a. Marie zei dat ze Jan's broodje at.
 b. Marie: "Ik eet Jan's broodje." *simultaneous*
 c. Marie: "Ik at Jan's broodje." *real past*

So-called forward shifted cases, in which the embedded event occurs after the time of the matrix event, are not allowed in both languages.

The distinction between Dutch and English with respect to the reading for non-stative eventualities in complement clauses is the crucial part of this paper. It is this difference that we will test experimentally. The phenomenon of Sequence of Tense refers to the possibility of simultaneity between the matrix event and the complement one. Rephrasing, the distinction between English and Dutch in these terms, we can state that Dutch has Sequence of Tense for all eventualities, whereas English only has Sequence of Tense for states and not for non-states.

The difference between English and Dutch non-states can also be stated in terms of imperfectivity. Smith (1991) introduces a number of tests. The examples in (5a) and (5b) are infelicitous. In these cases English has to use the progressive, as in (6). On the basis of these tests, she concludes that English simple past tense is perfective. Compare them with the Dutch examples in (7a) and (7b). There is a sharp contrast between the Dutch and the English examples. From this contrast we can conclude that Dutch simple past tense is imperfective. The embedded tense has to be imperfective to allow Sequence of Tense.²

- (5) a. #Mary walked to school but she didn't actually get there.
 b. #Mary walked to school and she's still walking.
- (6) a. Mary was walking to school but she didn't actually get there.
 b. Mary was walking to school and she's still walking.
 (Smith 1991: 101)
- (7) a. Marie liep naar school, maar kwam er nooit aan.
 M. walked to school but came there never at
 b. Marie liep naar school en ze loopt nog.
 M. walked to school and she walks still

This paper focuses on the second language acquisition of this difference in perfectivity between Dutch and English. We predict that Dutch second language learners will not show the distinction between states and non-states in English. Therefore, they will allow simultaneity for English non-state cases, based on their knowledge of the L1 grammar. This paper sets out to show a transfer from Dutch L1 to English L2, in the sense of White (1989). In the experiment we will distinguish three cases. The crucial case is the simultaneous case. This is where we predict to find differences between the two groups of subjects. We will contrast these results with two other cases: the real past case (the embedded event occurs before the matrix one) and the

forward shifted case (embedded event occurs after the matrix one). We expect the real past case to be accepted by both L1 and L2 speakers and the forward shifted case to be rejected by them. The crucial difference is highlighted in Table 1 in (8).

(8) Table 1. Predictions

	states			non-states		
	E1	E2	E3	E1	E2	E3
L1: English	ok	ok	*	ok	*	*
L2: Dutch	ok	ok	*	ok	ok	*

2. Methodology

In this section I will discuss the experiment, its methodology and the results. There were seven short stories accompanied by pictures to help subjects to remember the order of events. For each story two statements were made about what the person in the story had said about the events. The subjects were asked to accept or reject the statement as a report of what had happened in the story. In the case they rejected the statement they were asked to correct it. There were 12 statements that contained a simple past in a complement clause with a simple past tense, as in (9). The following stative predicates were used were *to be*, *to love*, *to be at*. The non-stative ones that were used were *to read*, *to write*, *to visit*, *to ride*. There were two control questions containing future tenses. An excerpt of a simultaneous reading with a non-state is given in (10).

- (9) a. Mary said that she was happy.
b. Mary said that she read a newspaper.

- (10) Excerpt of a simultaneous reading with a non-state

⟨picture: woman reading a newspaper⟩
This is Mary and in the morning she is reading a newspaper.
 ⟨picture: same woman reading a letter⟩
Later that day after the mail arrived. She is reading a letter and says:
“This morning I read a newspaper. Now, I am reading a letter and
tonight I will read a book”.
 ⟨picture: same woman reading a book⟩
 (10) a. Mary said she read a letter.
 b. Mary said she read a newspaper.

The first test statement in (10a) only allows a real past reading and therefore it is not a felicitous report of the situation presented in the story (*Mary is reading a letter while she is saying something*). We predict the subjects not to allow the first test

statement and correct it to a progressive *Mary said she was/is reading a letter*. We predict that the second test statement is accepted.

A total of 29 Dutch students at the University of Utrecht in The Netherlands were tested. The average years of education in English language was 5.86 years (STD=1.07). None of the subjects had been living in an English speaking country for longer than three months. For all of them Dutch was their native language. This was also the case for their parents. None of them was bilingual. A total of 21 American-English students at the University of Massachusetts were tested as a control group.³ The results are given in Table 2 in (11).

(11) Table 2. Results⁴

% of acceptance	States			Non-states		
	E1	E2	E3	E1	E2	E3
L1: English	95	14	5	93	7	0
L2: Dutch	78	57	5	85	29	4

3. Analysis

In this section I will discuss three observations based on the results. In Section 3.1 I will discuss the L1 versus the L2 non-states. In Section 3.2 I will discuss a possible explanation why 14% of the L1 speakers allow the simultaneous reading for states, while we expect all of them to accept it. Finally in Section 3.3 I will discuss why only 78% of the L2 speakers accept the real past case for states. Again in this case we expect all of them to accept it.

3.1 L1 and L2 non-states

The main hypothesis of this paper is that Dutch L2 speakers will allow simultaneity between events for non-stative eventualities, while L1 speakers will reject it. These predictions are borne out: 29% of the L2 speakers accept this reading, while only 7% of the L1 speakers do. These L2 speakers allow (12a) as a felicitous report for the utterance in (12b). The L1 speakers reject this report (in 7% of the cases).

- (12) a. Mary said that she ate John’s sandwich.
b. Mary: “I am eating John’s sandwich.”

In the introduction of this paper I have stated the difference between English and Dutch states in terms of imperfectivity of the past tense: the Dutch simple past morpheme is associate with imperfective and the English simple past with perfective. The results show a transfer of imperfectivity from the L1 grammar to the L2 grammar (White 1989; White and Genesee 1996; Schwartz and Sprouse 1996). In this case we see that L2-learners with even six years of English education still

(partly) rely on their L1 grammar. The expectation is that “younger” speakers will allow this case more often.

I have proposed the imperfective feature in Hollebrandse (2000) to arrange Sequence of Tense, i.e., this feature has to arrange the simultaneity in time of both events.⁵ This feature is crucially involved in “providing” simultaneous readings. It “opens up” the lower clause, time-wise and in that sense allows for a time period of the embedded event which overlaps with the matrix clause. The requirement on Sequence of Tense is that only imperfective allow simultaneity of events.

The imperfective requirement states that both features, on the complement as well as on the main verb have to be imperfective. This is attractive, since we can then state the phenomenon of Sequence of Tense in terms of agreement: both features have to agree with each other, i.e., they both have to be imperfective. In fact, this seems to hold for English, as is suggested by the example in (13) which does not allow a simultaneous reading.

- (13) John has said that he was happy.

However, for Dutch this does not seem to be the case: the example in (14) allows a simultaneous reading. In fact there doesn’t seem to be a difference between the present perfect case (14) and the simple past case (14). However, it could also be the case that the Dutch present perfect has lost its perfective nature.⁶

- (14) Jan heeft gezegd dat hij gelukkig was.
J. has said that he happy was

For this paper the relevant feature is the lower one.⁷ It is this feature and its association with the simple past tense form in Dutch that is transferred to the L2 speakers grammar of English.

In my view this feature is associated with the simple past tense morpheme, but it is not part of its lexical entry. It is a semantic feature which is inserted into the tense node. This feature is then checked off by the simple past morpheme (à la Chomsky (1995)). The association of the simple past tense morpheme and the imperfectivity in Dutch L1 grammar allows the Dutch L2 speaker of English to check off an imperfective feature in English with a simple past tense. The L1 speaker can only check off an imperfective feature with a progressive form.

It is exactly the Dutch L2 learner’s knowledge of the progressive that will make him or her associate the imperfective with the English progressive and not with simple past tense.

The question might arise why only 29% of the L2 speakers and not more. This must be due to the fact that these L2 speakers are reasonably good speakers of English. They also had a fairly extensive education in the English language: 5.86 years (STD = 1.07) on average. The expectation is that the percentage of L2 speakers that allows the simultaneous reading for non-states will go up in with subject groups that have had less education in English.

3.2 L1 and L2 differences in simultaneous readings for states

The second part of the main hypothesis is that both L1 and L2 speakers should allow simultaneity between eventualities for states. This hypothesis is not borne out: only 14% of the L1 speakers accepted simultaneity. So 86% rejected (15b) as a report for (15a).

- (15) a. John: "I am happy."
b. John said that he was happy.

Subjects were also asked to correct the test statement in the case they rejected it. These corrections are insightful. I counted the following type of corrections: present tense in the complement clause with a stative eventuality (16a) and with a non-stative eventuality (16b), progressive with a present tense (16c) and progressive with a past tense (16d). The numbers are given in the Table 3 in (17).

- (16) a. John said that he loves ice-cream.
b. John said that he reads the newspaper.
c. John said that he is reading the newspaper.
d. John said that he was reading the newspaper.

(17) Table 3. Corrections

% of occurrences	E2-S prs	E2-NS prs	E2-NS prog prs	E2-NS prog past
	<i>that he loves ice-cream</i>	<i>that he reads the newspaper</i>	<i>that he is reading the newspaper</i>	<i>that he was reading the newspaper</i>
L1: English	71	0	69	10
L2: Dutch	22	2	36	24

We see that the L1 speakers correct the simple past tense to the present tense in 71% of the states (first column (E2-S prs)). In the case of the non-states they do not correct it to the present tense (second column (E2-NS prs)). We see that these cases are corrected to the present progressive (69%, third column (E2-NS prog)). In 10% of the cases it was corrected to the past progressive.

L1 speakers correct the past-under-past to the present-under-past. There are two possibilities: this is an effect of the habitual or generic reading. Or, L1 subjects prefer a so-called double access reading. This could be an effect of the habitual or generic reading of the English present tense. English present tense has a habitual or generic reading, rather than an episodic one. Subjects might take the scene told in the stories as expressing a habitual characteristic of the protagonist. However, this cannot be the case, since that explanation would not predict a difference between stative and non-stative eventualities. Only the first ones are changed 71% of the time and not non-stative eventualities.

In fact, the present tense embedded under a past tense in English has a so-called double access reading only for stative eventualities.⁸ Only for these cases the time of the event in the complement clause has to include both the time of the matrix verb as well as the utterance time of the sentence (Ogihara 1995; Abusch 1991). The example in (16a) has a reading in which the time of the complement event, *loving ice-cream*, includes both the time when John said it and the utterance time of the sentence (besides the habitual reading in which John is an ice-cream lover). The non-stative eventuality in (16b) only has the habitual reading.

Since subjects make a clear distinction between stative and non-stative eventualities, habituality cannot have an influence on the difference in acceptance between states and non-states. The difference must have to do with a double access “effect”. The L1 subjects take what the protagonist said to still hold at the utterance time of the sentence. Even when in the experiment this was completely left open. The protagonist says: “Now, I am reading a letter”. It is completely left open whether the protagonist is still reading the newspaper at the moment of uttering the test question. A similar effect can be seen for the progressive. L1 speakers use the present tense in 69% of the cases, as opposed to 10%.

3.3 L2 real past readings

Only 78% of the L2 speakers accepted the real past reading for the English state, event though the L1 grammar of those speakers (Dutch) allows for this reading. The reason for this might be that there is an alternative form, namely the present perfect. To express a real past reading Dutch can either use the simple past tense or the present perfect. In a number of cases (18a) and (18b) are felicitous.

- (18) a. Jan zei dat hij een boterham at.
 J. said that he a sandwich ate
 “John said that he ate a sandwich.”
 b. Jan zei dat hij een boterham gegeten heeft.
 J. said that he a sandwich eaten has
 “John said that he ate a sandwich.”

If we look at the corrections, we see that out of the 22% rejections of the real past reading for stative eventualities, 17% is corrected to the present perfect. For non-stative eventualities 12% out of 15% is corrected to the present perfect. The L1 speakers have not corrected it to the present perfect. These numbers are summarized in Table 4 in (19).

(19) **Table 4.** Corrections to present perfect

% of occurrences	States	Non-states
L1 grammar	0	0
L2 grammar	17 (out of 22)	12 (out of 15)

This looks like another case of transfer: the present perfect is a felicitous alternative for the simple past in Dutch L1 grammar. It is not in the English grammar. Nevertheless, the L2 speaker transfer it to their L2 grammar of English. L2 speakers correcting the simple past to a present perfect is not too much of a surprise, since Hollebrandse (2000) also found this experimentally in their L1 grammar.

4. Conclusions

For Sequence of Tense readings, the following difference between Dutch and English occurs: Dutch shows simultaneity (or Sequence of Tense) for all eventualities, but English only shows this for stative and not for non-stative eventualities. Hollebrandse (2000) proposes that this difference can be stated in terms of imperfectivity. There is a (imperfectivity) requirement on Sequence of Tense: the lower tense has to be imperfective to allow Sequence of Tense.

This paper focuses on the L2 acquisition of the imperfective feature. Both English and Dutch have this feature. However, they are associated with different morphological tenses. In Dutch it is associated with the simple past tense and in English it is associated with the progressive. The English simple past tense form is associated with a perfective feature. The L2 speakers allow, based on their L1 grammar, the imperfective feature to be associate with the English simple past tense. I proposed that this can be stated in minimalist terms: it is the imperfective feature that is checked off in Dutch by the simple past tense morpheme and in English by the progressive. Dutch L2 speakers of English allow the imperfective feature to be checked off by the English simple past tense morpheme. It is not before they have acquired the progressive, that they reject simultaneous readings for the past-under-past construction with non-stative eventualities. This was shown in an experiment: 29% of the L2 speakers allow simultaneity between non-stative eventualities with simple past tense morphemes.

This paper shows the transfer from the Dutch L1 grammar of the association between the imperfective feature and the simple past tense form to the English L2 grammar.

Furthermore, two other, kind of peculiar observations were made on the basis of these results: L1 speakers tend to reject the simultaneous reading for the past-under-past and correct this form to the present-under-past. Second, L2 speakers tend to

correct the real past reading and correct it to the present perfect. The present perfect is an alternative in the Dutch L1 grammar, but not really in the English grammar.

Notes

1. I use Bach's term *eventualities* to cover both states and non-states.
2. See also Boogaart (1999, 2000) for a discussion of this. It is also discussed in Hollebrandse (1999).
3. Thanks to Anna Arrequi for letting me use her Linguistics 201 students and thanks to Jan Don for letting me use his Introduction to Linguistics students.
4. The only significant cases between L1 and L2 (two-tail t-test) were states E1 ($p=0.04$) and non-states E2 ($p=0.009$).
5. Besides this requirement Hollebrandse (2000) argues for a requirement of complementation.
6. For German it seems to be that case that the present perfect has replaced the simple past tense. The present perfect lost its perfective nature and took over the imperfective nature of the simple past tense.
7. There is a weaker version which states that only the verb in the complement has to have an imperfective feature. In this case the aspectual nature of the higher predicate is irrelevant.
8. As with the past-under-past construction, there is no difference between stative and non-stative eventualities for the present-under-past in Dutch.

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