

TRANSFER AND UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR IN UNACCUSATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS ERRORS

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23

1. Introduction

From the first studies in the field of second language acquisition (L2A), it was noticed that many of the grammatical errors L2 learners make –in Corder’s (1967) sense, as opposed to mistakes– are not due apparently to their native language (L1) structural influence, as reflected in traditional Contrastive Analysis theory, but rather seem to involve or be a sign of some process of intralingual development. In fact, nowadays Interlanguage –IL, the concept about the transitional linguistic competence of L2 learners first introduced by Selinker (1972)– researchers take for granted that both factors, that is, native language influence and some kind of independent creative processes –call them Universal Grammar or Operating Principles, to name two of the most well-known proposals– are at work in the building up of non-native linguistic competence.

Elsewhere (Escutia 2002) I have attempted to show how L2 English word order errors in indirect embedded clauses by L1 Spanish adult students do not respond to the surface structure of the corresponding L1 constructions. Rather, their origin might be found in both the interaction of the different values of the L1 and L2 for specific syntactic features and overgeneralization of grammatical aspects of the L2; that is, both L1 transfer and creative construction could be active in the acquisition of these particular structures and their effects can be linguistically articulated.

Here, I will present some written production data taken from the compositions of L2 adult high-intermediate learners in an institutional milieu. I will look at one type of error which involves non-standard subject expletive insertion in sentences with unaccusative predicates. It is a very common error in learners at this proficiency level, and which, as in the case alluded above of the indirect embedded questions, does not respond to the surface structure of the corresponding L1 constructions. Using linguistic theory I will provide an explanation of the possible underlying linguistic processes at work and will show how the grammatical transitional solution the learners have found is consistent with Universal Grammar but corresponds neither to the L1 nor the L2.

I will proceed as follows: first, the linguistic framework adopted in my study will be briefly introduced; secondly, the type of error will be presented; thirdly, the surface manifestations of unaccusativity in both Spanish and English will be examined and contrasted; then, I will return to the specific error referred to and try to account for it in terms of linguistic theory; finally, some pedagogical recommendations will be briefly sketched.

2. Linguistic articulation of transfer and construction processes

I concur with Flynn (1987) that L1 influence and independent construction processes are both significant in L2 acquisition, but they should emerge as natural by-products of a theory based on fundamentally secure theoretical foundations, both psychologically and linguistically. Moreover, this theory must be capable of explaining properties of language deeper than simple surface structure reflexes in order to significantly account for crucial aspects of language acquisition.

In the last twenty-five years, there have been several important attempts at formulating a coherent theory of L2 acquisition compounding this dual influence within the chomskyan theory of Universal Grammar (UG, or innate constraints in the development of natural grammars), first within the Principles and Parameters framework (Chomsky 1981) and more recently within the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995, 2000, 2001a, 2001b), which would make both components, contrast and construction, compatible and derivable from the same linguistic theory. The former approach postulated that UG included universal linguistic principles (e.g. structure dependence, projection principle or X-bar theory, binding, etc) and built-in options called parameters with binary settings allowing for crosslinguistic variation (e. g., head first or last with respect to the different types of phrases in a language). Parameter options determined a cluster of derived syntactic properties that a native speaker would display and learners would

theoretically learn once they had set correctly the parametric option of the L1 or L2, respectively. The Minimalist Program associates those parametric differences between grammars and their consequent syntactic effects with the feature values of functional categories, such as complementizers, agreement, negation, determiner, etc; all of them part of the UG inventory. As White (2003: 10) explains, “the lexicons of different languages vary as to which functional categories and features are instantiated and what the strength of the various features may be”.

Here I subscribe to the position that L2 adult students project those feature values present in their L1s as an initial hypothesis in their handling of the L2, that is, what has been called the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis (Schwartz and Sprouse 1994, 1996). Within this hypothesis, convergence on the relevant L2 properties may occur through restructuring of the L1 grammar in response to L2 input. However, this is not guaranteed and divergent outcomes are possible though all of them supposedly constrained by UG. In addition, I agree with other researchers (Liceras et al 1997, Smith and Tsimpli 1995) that L2 functional feature values are not acquirable and restructuring of the L1 grammar takes place in a piece-meal fashion, trying to accommodate the different surface structures or manifestations which in the L2 are the syntactic consequence of those values.

In this spirit, I will examine next the type of English as a foreign language (EFL) error present in the production of unaccusative predicates by Spanish high intermediate EFL students, seeking to point out what might occur linguistically in the construction of their IL grammars for these particular structures and how L1 influence could be linguistically articulated in their production. These are certainly performance data obtained from the students' academic writing. Although extrapolating to grammatical competence is a big jump, their frequency as well as the students' surprise at being corrected when faced with this kind of error might be a sign of some stable underlying grammatical specifications.

3. Data and subjects

The data to be examined correspond to a very common type of error in both the written and oral production of advanced Spanish EFL students, as any English teacher at this level can bear out. It consists of the insertion of a non-standard preverbal expletive and post-verbal placing of the non-clausal subject in sentences with ergative, passive and *be+adj* predicates. The data exemplifying it correspond to six sentences extracted from the written homework compositions of six high intermediate students, as measured by their having passed the Cambridge First Certificate in English examination the previous year. They are all second year Spanish university students majoring in English at Madrid Complutense University.

Only one sentence has been chosen from each subject –as this is a qualitative study, each item reflecting the error under study with a different kind of predicate. They represent the whole gamut of possibilities for this kind of error within the students’ group, as can be seen by looking up the other eighteen examples produced by their classmates in the appendix. The students selected –sixteen altogether– were enrolled in a four-month Composition course where they had to hand in three compositions, out of which all twenty-four items have been taken. For each example (in 1a-6a), both the corresponding standard English and Spanish version are given below (in b. and c., respectively)¹.

- (1) a. *.. and then it was opened the door
 b. ‘.. and then the door (was) opened’
 c. ...y entonces se abrió la puerta/(la puerta) fue abierta (la puerta)
- (2) a. *When it begins the second night everything is quiet.
 b. ‘When the second night begins, everything is quiet’
 c. Cuando empieza la segunda noche todo está tranquilo.
- (3) a. *It happened many things
 b. ‘There happened many things’ / ‘Many things happened’
 c. Ocurrieron muchas cosas.
- (4) a. *It exists many people that would do the same
 b. ‘There exist many people who would do the same’ / ‘Many people exist who would...’
 c. Existe mucha gente que haría lo mismo
- (5) a. *It was eaten a lot of food in the party
 b. ‘A lot of food was eaten at the party’/ (?) ‘There was (a lot of food) eaten at the party (a lot of food)’
 c. Fue consumida mucha comida en la fiesta / Se consumió mucha comida en la fiesta.
- (6) a. *... because it is possible human cloning
 b. ‘... because human cloning is possible’
 c. porque es posible la clonación humana

As can be seen, in each case a non-standard expletive (semantically empty) preverbal pronoun *it* has been inserted where standard English would either place the semantic subject pre-verbally (in all examples (1) to (6)) or insert expletive *there*, which is theoretically possible in items (3), (4) and (5)² (see Quirk et al 18.45, 49: 1404-1409).

Expletive *it* can only anticipate clauses –which have neither person nor number (functional) φ -features– because it carries both person (3rd) and number (singular) to match the corresponding finite features of the Tense Phrase (TP) and is co-

referential with the notional post-verbal clausal subject. Expletive *there*, on the other hand, only carries (3rd) person features, leaving the number feature in T(ense) unvalued and making thus ungrammatical the corresponding sentence (e.g.: *It/*there is impossible that she was at home*). It can anticipate indefinite DPs (basically, NPs), as in examples (3) to (5), which have both person and number features to value the corresponding ones in T. *There* is placed pre-verbally by merge³, the operation of assembling the sentence, in order to satisfy the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) feature of T, which makes sure that all English sentences have overt pre-verbal subjects occupying the specifier position of TP (thus fully projecting T into TP).

Data similar to those in (1a)-(6a) have already been attested by researchers, such as Zobl (1989), Rutherford (1989) and Oshita (2000), who also provide written production from –among others– Spanish L1 intermediate students. Other authors have studied the English and Japanese L2 acquisition of unaccusative predicates (see Hirakawa 1995, 2001; Oshita 2001; Sorace and Shomura 2001) and still others the L2 acquisition of Romance languages (see Sorace 1993, 2000; Montrul 2005), in both cases, from a broader perspective than is taken here and not focusing on a particular type of error as I do.

4. Contrastive study of unaccusativity in English and Spanish

According to modern linguistic theory, verbs such as *open* and *begin* in examples (1) and (2) are intransitive ergative verbs, whose sole argument bears the (semantic) θ -role of theme (that is, the thing affected by or undergoing the action of the verb, with an understood and undefined external agent) and form part of a larger class of predicates that also includes passives (such as (5)) and raising predicates (like *happen*, *exist* and *be*+(certain raising) *adjectives* (such as, *likely* or *certain*), as illustrated in (3), (4) and (6), respectively). The property they all share has been termed unaccusativity. As pointed out by Levin & Rappaport-Hovav (1995), unaccusativity is a syntactically codified semantic property of certain predicates. From a syntactic viewpoint, unaccusative verbs are monadic predicates with a basic internal argument appearing in an external position because they cannot assign accusative case to their internal argument (Perlmutter 1978, Burzio 1986). With respect to their lexico-semantic composition, many unaccusatives express events where an object experiences an internal change related either to its state (e. g. *become*, *disappear*) or its position (change of location, e.g. *arrive*). Other unaccusatives are inherently so, like the presentational/existential *happen*, *exist* and *be* in (3) to (6). All of the above are monadic predicates with an undefined external agent and, consequently, no corresponding transitive counterpart.

It might seem surprising to find predicates with *be* here alongside other predicates which signal change of state. However, in Old English the latter are conjugated with the verb *to be* as an auxiliary –as in German, Italian or French today, although with certain differences between them (see Sorace 1993, 2000) –rather than with *have*, as in present day English. Some of this auxiliary use of *be* remains in examples from the King James’ Bible, as in ‘when they are come to the multitude...’ (Mat. 17, 14). In addition, this use is also found in more modern literature, as for example, in the 19th century novel *Vanity Fair*, by William Thackeray: “Becky and Rawdon, as I have seen, are come together after Waterloo...” (Chapter XXXIV).

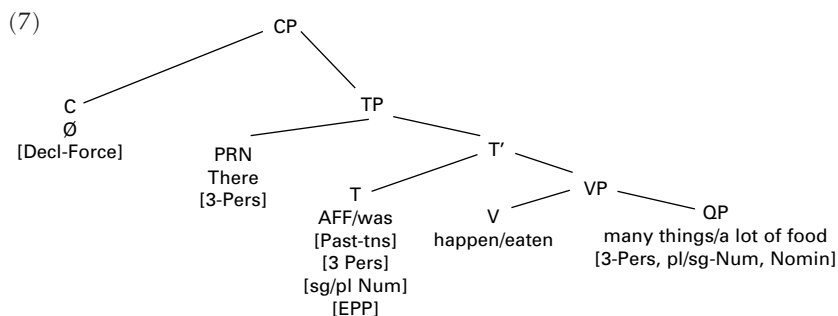
Sorace (1993, 1995, 2000) has proposed the so-called Unaccusative Hierarchy, according to which, after applying to some predicates certain tests, they are placed from most unaccusative to most unergative (intransitive with an external agent). At the unaccusative end of the scale would be the change of location and state predicates, like those mentioned before, followed by those of continuation of a pre-existing state (*stay, remain*), those of a state or condition (*be, seem*) and those of a change of state with a transitive counterpart (*open, break, begin*). Going towards the most unergative end of the scale would be uncontrolled processes (*tremble, shine*), motional controlled processes (*run, dance*) and non-motional controlled processes (*talk, work*). As can be seen, our examples would include predicates at the unaccusative end of the hierarchy.

28

Since unaccusatives have no underlying argument with an Agent θ -role, they cannot assign accusative case to their sole argument; instead, they value it as nominative via its agreement relationship in ϕ -features with the finite T probe which structurally dominates it (c-commands, specifically). Subsequently, the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) feature of T triggers its A(rgument)-movement in order to become the structural subject of T (see Radford 2004). This is consistent with the so-called Thematic Hierarchy Principle (Jackendoff 1990; Grimshaw 1990; Dowty 1991; Van Valin and LaPolla 1997), which is an interface constraint matching semantic roles with syntactic positions. The latter establishes that the argument with the highest position in such hierarchy (this being, with some disagreement among different accounts: AGENT > RECIPIENT > THEME > LOCATION > SOURCE > GOAL > OBLIQUES) be mapped to subject position, the next highest to direct object position, the next one to indirect object position and so forth. As in the case of the unaccusatives there is only one theme argument, it is going to appear syntactically as the subject although its underlying position would correspond to object or complement position.

What has just been explained implies that –with respect to the example sentences– the following clauses –reflecting the type of errors that both Zobl and Rutherford report for their Spanish L1 subjects– are ungrammatical: *... *and then (was) opened*

the door, **Happened many things*, **Exist many people...*, **When begins the second night...*, **Was eaten a lot of food*, **Is possible human cloning*, since the theme argument has to raise to subject position in order to value and delete the EPP feature of T. The Extended Projection Principle (Chomsky 1986) states that finite clauses must have subjects (overt ones, in English) and has been formalized in recent accounts (Radford 2004) as a feature carried by T which has to be deleted by a matching subject in the specifier position of TP, whose unvalued Case feature can be assigned nominative value in the base. The underlying post-verbal position of the theme argument can be seen in their occurrence in constructions with existential *there*, as in the examples: *There happened many things*, *There exist many people...*, *There was eaten a lot of food at the party*, as well as in their occurrence as direct object in those cases with transitive counterparts (ergatives, lower in the unaccusative hierarchy), like *open* (*She opened the door*) or *begin* (*The teacher began the lesson*) and in their corresponding active counterpart in the case of passives (*The guests ate a lot of food at the party*). A (simplified) representation of two of the examples is given in (7) (where \emptyset stands for a null complementizer carrying a declarative force feature, AFF for the verbal tense affix which is lowered to V in the case of lexical verbs and QP for Quantifier Phrase, a kind of DP whose head is a quantifier).



Thus, two possibilities are available in standard English for examples (3) to (5): either the argument moves to the subject position (spec-TP) or the expletive pronoun *there* (a syntactic filler pronoun without a theta-role) is merged in such position in order to delete the EPP feature of T (or moves there, for those who maintain the base generation of non-thematic expletives in spec-VP). This is so because, in order to be interpretable and grammatical in sentences, DPs must have, respectively, both theta-role (assigned by the corresponding predicate in base position) and Case. For (6), an example of the predicate *be+adj*, the only viable possibility is the raising of the argument to subject position, as T c-commands a definite matching goal (*human cloning*= *the cloning of humans*).

In Spanish, the L1 of our students, the themes of the corresponding ergative, passive or raising predicates do not need to move pre-verbally to satisfy the EPP but can remain in their underlying post-verbal position because that is taken care of by the preverbal null subject pronoun *pro* present in null subject languages like Italian or Spanish (Rizzi 1982, 1990). Thus, in the corresponding Spanish translations (1c-6c) to the above non-native English items the DP theme remains *in situ*. Here it is not possible to insert an expletive in preverbal position because whereas English finite morphology requires that the syntactic preverbal subject be realized overtly (even in cases like these, where it has no theta role), the differentiated person and number agreement inflections of Spanish permit null subjects. In fact, there is no such type of expletive in native Spanish⁴. While agreement in Spanish is said to have the syntactic feature [+pronominal], which allows it to identify its null subjects, English is characterised as [-pronominal] (see Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 1998).

5. Transfer and linguistic articulation of L2 unaccusativity errors

30

Our L2 students, such as those of the studies mentioned above, seem to react to the common lexical property of unaccusativity, that is, L2 learners unconsciously seem to pick up on the fact that unaccusative predicates have undergoer subjects. For example, many of the errors Oshita (2000) found in the corpus he studied of L2 English unaccusatives production by different L1 speakers (Spanish speaking ones included) corresponded to passive unaccusatives (e.g. **“My mother was died when I was just a baby”*). This somehow points to the learners’ implicit knowledge of the patient role of the subject in these constructions. As this property is the result of the interaction of argument structure, Case assignment and satisfying the EPP, it corresponds to constants in the grammatical design of natural languages, or, in chomskyan terms, to UG aspects.

Oshita (2000) found that L2 learners treat unaccusatives and unergatives differently (for example, in terms of always observing the S-V order with the latter while often allowing the V-S order with the former, up to high intermediate proficiency levels). This is taken by some linguists as an example of the poverty of the stimulus problem (Hirakawa 2001, Montrul 2005), that is, a sign that UG must be at work, since there is nothing in the input that might lead them to such different treatment. Consequently, unaccusative verbs are a good test case for implicit learning because they are found in a great variety of languages and behave in the same way although they vary as to their syntactic reflexes; they are never taught explicitly and native speakers are unaware of this phenomenon in their L1. Nevertheless, in spite of all

these characteristics, L2 learners acquire the distinction between these two types of intransitive verbs (Montrul 2005). Both Sorace (1993) and Montrul (2005) even show that L2 students are sensitive to the unaccusative hierarchy and the semantic distinctions between its different verb subtypes.

Thus, our students represent the argument structure of unaccusative verbs as having an internal theme argument, which they map appropriately to a position within the VP, although this representation could also derive from L1 transfer rather than directly from UG. Their problems relate to moving this argument to subject position in the syntax, as native English speakers do. However, what our examples show is that our students somehow know that the (preverbal) subject position has to be overtly filled (that is, the EPP has to be satisfied as in English) and so they provide a syntactic filler for it. The only divergence with L1 English standard speakers is that they use a different (semantically empty subject) expletive, *it* instead of *there*, which, on the other hand, is also present in analogous cases in another natural English variety, Black Vernacular English (in examples such as *it ain't no heaven for you to go to*: see Labov 1969)⁵. It would seem, then, that in our students' IL expletive *it* carries a 3rd person feature and an unvalued number feature as, both in the examples under study as well as in those from the appendix, it occurs with either singular or plural post-verbal subjects. Native *there*, on the other hand, only has a (3rd) person feature and no number feature.

31

Oshita (2000) also provides similar examples, mainly for Spanish and Italian L1 speakers, whose most frequent errors belong to the type **it-V-NP* along with the **Ø-V-NP* type rather than passive-unaccusative errors, as is the case for the Korean and Japanese speakers of his corpus. The fact that our students' errors tend to be of the first type (**it-V-NP*) might point to a more advanced proficiency stage than the **Ø-V-NP* type from the Spanish speakers of Zobl and Rutherford⁶. It might be a sign that our students are becoming fully aware of the non-null subject nature of English since expletives like these seem to be the most difficult type of subjects for L1 null-subject students to incorporate. At the same time, this knowledge would be compatible with not having learned to raise the theme argument of unaccusative verbs to subject position in all cases, even when it is obligatory because the theme argument is definite, as seen in examples (1a), (2a) and (6a).

Consequently, it might seem that both phenomena, non-null subject and subject raising, need not be related in L2A, contrary to thinking of the first L2A accounts of the Null Subject Parameter (White 1985, Phinney 1987, etc), where verb-subject inversion used to be considered one of the derived properties of its positive setting (with test sentences normally involving ergative verbs). Here, satisfying the EPP and subject raising seem to be independent. In fact, Montrul (2004) shows how the morphosyntactic aspects of the Null Subject Parameter and the

unaccusative/unergative distinction are acquired in very early childhood (before four years of age) in monolingual Spanish children and, in L1A, their syntactic consequences might well be linked and fall into place seamlessly. Probably, the situation is the same for English L1, but adult L2A seems to follow different paths, as has been assumed here.

In sum, our subjects may construct their mental grammar in a UG-determined way since they show evidence of the involvement and interaction of the theta Criterion (each argument must be assigned a semantic role), the EPP, the thematic hierarchy and Case assignment. It is possible that in constructing their grammatical specifications for these particular items they may start with their L1 knowledge, which would lead them to simply leave in place the internal argument of the unaccusative predicate in surface syntax, without either raising it to subject position (as in their L1 satisfying the EPP does not require such movement) or providing a subject expletive (treating the L2 as a null-subject language, like the L1). This would seem to be the case for those Spanish speakers reported by both Zobl and Rutherford. Nevertheless, our students have taken a step further in also providing an expletive (although a non-standard one⁷) to satisfy the EPP in the way it is done in the L2. So, although at first either UG, in the sensitivity to unaccusatives' underlying structure, or transfer, in knowing about it through the L1 and treating the L2 as a null-subject language, may be at work, the transitional grammar at this stage seems to have been restructured due to the full realization of the non-null subject nature of English.

32

6. Pedagogical considerations

Although my work here did not set out to study English unaccusative items from a pedagogical point of view, but rather to linguistically characterize a particular type of L2 error in the production of these elements, it seems pertinent, nevertheless, that I should briefly suggest some teaching applications.

If the errors that have been analysed are developmental, as indeed they seem to be, given how common they are in students from different L1 backgrounds at this high intermediate level (Oshita 2000), there is not much one can do about it except for awareness raising. I do not subscribe to the position which identifies adult L2A with L1A, in which case resetting the corresponding parameter might do the trick. I rather believe that many properties which in the L1 might be linked to particular functional feature values –like either the [\pm STRONG] character of verbal inflection, depending on the richness of verbal morphological paradigms, or the [\pm pronominal] feature of verbal agreement which might link both verbal movement and (non) null-subject properties in a super-parameter– are learned by adult L2

students in a piece-meal fashion; and, for some particular structures, when they are conscious of the difference between the L1 and the L2 through corrective feedback.

Therefore I agree with authors like White (1988), who think that adult L2A cannot proceed only on positive evidence. She suggests that there are cases where change from X to Y will require negative evidence. The results of her studies on verb-raising and English adverb placement by L1 French elementary school children (White 1991, Trahey and White 1993) indicate that positive evidence is not sufficient to trigger parameter resetting and that explicit evidence, both negative and positive, is more effective in assisting learners to acquire the properties of the L2 than naturalistic positive evidence alone.

The same view is held by authors working in a different framework like Gass and Varonis (1994), who point out that “the awareness of the mismatch serves the function of triggering a modification of existing L2 knowledge, the results of which may show up at a later point in time” (p. 299). Long (1996) also makes this point when asserting that negative feedback obtained during negotiation work or elsewhere may be facilitative of L2 development, at least for vocabulary, morphology, and language specific syntax, and essential for learning certain specifiable L1/L2 contrasts.

In our particular case, corrective feedback could be provided *a posteriori* by presenting (adult) students with sentences like those exemplified in (1) to (6) (or in the appendix), even alongside others with inversion but no expletive, and questioning them about their acceptability and the specific necessary changes which would make them acceptable. Noticing their error will at least help them in correcting their production when this can be monitored. Preferably, *a priori*, the items under study –ergative verbs, passives and raising predicates– could be taught together, showing their particular possibilities in the placing of their subjects and expletive pronoun use. An analysis which groups a number of structures like these together in terms of their thematic structure clearly has pedagogical advantages.

Thus, following Strozer’s (1992) recommendations for other types of items, I would encourage teaching these elements by relating them all in a specific presentation dedicated to unaccusative items, pointing out the (parametric) differences between the L1 and L2. Both facts explored here, subject inversion and the non-native use of expletive *it*, follow from the thematic requirements of these predicates, and making L2 students aware of it may help them understand and avoid these types of frequent mistakes. Probably, there would be no need to mention other types of predicates, because, as mentioned above, research shows that inversion errors with other verbs, even intransitive (non-ergative) ones, are altogether negligible.

One can expect that there will be transfer from the L1 at the beginning of L2 learning of these items, which favors post-verbal subjects and no expletive insertion. Even later, when students know that structures like examples (1) to (6) are not acceptable and when they have attained a higher proficiency level, they may still tend to produce them, as did our students and as do even more advanced learners when they cannot monitor their performance. As Strozer points out, non-native adult performance seems to require a lot of conscious ‘patchwork’ on the part of the speaker “who, for all I know, is using strategies and auxiliary routes that the native speaker does not have to resort to” (Strozer 1992: 101).

In this sense, some oral and written drilling practice, both when presenting the unaccusative items for the first time and when revising these constructions later, might be advisable in order to build up a habit to counteract the tendency towards inversion. Even if one does not subscribe to the view that learning a foreign language is just a matter of developing habits to counteract L1 interference, there are arguably some aspects of language production which benefit from this kind of practice once the learner has understood the problem cognitively. This may be one of them.

- 34 In this manner, this study may serve to back up an intuition many EFL teachers have, namely, the need for these structures to be taught explicitly to adult learners, making them aware of the conditions for both possibilities, subject raising and *there* insertion.

7. Conclusion

From the data and corresponding linguistic account given above one could conclude once again that L2 learning does not consist simply in the relexification or dressing up of the structures of the L1 in L2 words. Rather, a different process obtains where the following factors seem to be at work: UG (in the sensitivity to unaccusative underlying structure, perhaps through the L1), the underlying grammars of both the L1 (in the preference for leaving the subject in its underlying position) and L2 (in the provision of expletive subjects). The framework used here allows us both to articulate them linguistically and attribute to them unity of origin in terms of the same underlying principles. This is consistent with Liceras’s model of L2A (1996), according to which when adults learn an L2 they restructure (parts of) the linguistic representations they already possess on the model of the L2 surface structure. This is so because their learning procedures, unlike those of L1A, cannot access the feature values of the L2 functional or lexical elements being learned (in this case the [- pronominal] feature of agreement and the φ -features of expletive *it* in native English).

Appendix: **it-V-NP* items produced by ten other students of the same class:

1. ...because before it had been a drought.
2. ...and it appeared floods in some places.
3. There was a big famine in the country and it appeared dead men in some places.
4. In an ideal city it wouldn't exist violence.
5. I planted carefully the tree where it had been buried the cat.
6. It happened many strange things in that place.
7. It exists many people in the world without food.
8. Nevertheless it exists other cases...
9. It is very strange this fact...
10. From this failure it results a question.
11. I believe also that it should exist a legislation.
12. In some countries it is permitted assisted suicide.
13. It was introduced the idea that clonation can be the solution.
14. It can exist a risk.
16. Because it can appear physical and psychological problems.
17. In this family it succeeds terrible things.
18. It has to be an end to porn.

Notes

1. Although in the Spanish versions it is possible to place the subject pre-verbally in all the examples, post-verbal subjects sound more natural and less marked.

2. The fact that it is possible does not mean that it corresponds to real usage. For this reason, an interrogation mark has been placed in front of some of the glosses after having consulted several native speakers. In any case, their (un)acceptability is immaterial to the error under study.

3. Although there are authors who maintain that both expletives *it* and *there* are generated in the base as non-thematic subjects in (spec) VP.

4. For ergative verbs like *open*, the corresponding Spanish counterpart 'abrir' requires the presence of the reflexive clitic *se* (as shown in 1c) as an obligatory overt mark of intransitivity, that is, the non-causative variant of *open* must be overtly marked. As long as this morpheme is present, the theme argument may either remain in place or raise in front of it, so that both *Se abrió la puerta* and *La puerta se abrió* have the same propositional meaning and are (propositionally) equivalent to the passive counterpart (*la puerta*) *fue abierta* (*la puerta*) 'the door was opened'. The clitic has to be present to make the verb intransitive (to "absorb" the agent argument), so that the sentence **abrió la puerta* is ungrammatical in the intended intransitive meaning.

⁵. Or indeed in other natural (standard) languages, like German where *es (it)* is the only expletive: e.g. *Es sind drei Männer im ersten Abteil* ('There are three men in the first compartment', existential construction); *Es vergingen viele Jahrhunderte von Anfang* ('Many hundred years went by since the beginning', unaccusative verb construction). It even occurs as anticipatory subject with transitive verbs: *Es grüssen euch alle Heiligen* ('All the saints greet you', from Saint Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians 13, 12).

⁶. Although Oshita includes both types of errors from Spanish speakers, the corpus sample corresponds to mixed proficiency levels. On the other hand, our students also produced some * \emptyset -V-NP items in

their compositions but the tendency seemed to be toward the **it*-V-NP items.

⁷. As to why our students consistently choose *it* over *there* –as do Labov's (1969) subjects– a possible explanation lies in the well-attested preference of second language learners for the expression of one particular function –in this case that of a semantically empty subject– through one particular form, in this case *it*, the one that occurs in more contexts in the L2. *There*, on the other hand, as the contrast seen within item 3 in the appendix might show, could only correspond in the students' IL to its strictly existential use with the verb *to be*, as in their L1, where the impersonal form *hay* –very probably equivalent in their IL to *there is/are*– fulfils this function.

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