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Current Issues in Second Language Acquisition

Editors

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Universal Grammar and the acquisition of English L3 syntax

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Abstract

The relationship between linguistic theory and research on language acquisition has changed throughout the years. The main goal of this paper is to frame research on the acquisition of the syntax of a third language (L3) within the Universal Grammar (UG) approach. The paper provides an overview of the role of UG in language acquisition and highlights the findings of recently published research carried out with Basque-Spanish bilinguals who learn English as their third language. The suggestion is that the study of the acquisition of L3 syntax from a UG perspective will be of great interest for the development of a theory of the language faculty.

Key words: Universal Grammar (UG), acquisition, syntax, third language, bilinguals.

Resumen

La relación entre la investigación que se lleva a cabo en teoría lingüística y la que se realiza en el ámbito de adquisición del lenguaje ha cambiado a lo largo de los años. El principal objetivo de este trabajo es situar la investigación sobre adquisición de la sintaxis de terceras lenguas en el marco de la Gramática Universal (GU). El trabajo proporciona una panorámica general sobre el papel que se le atribuye a la GU en la adquisición del lenguaje y enfatiza los resultados de investigación publicada recientemente y llevada a cabo con alumnos bilingües (eusquera-castellano) que aprenden inglés como tercera lengua. Se sugiere que el estudio de la adquisición de la sintaxis de una tercera lengua desde la perspectiva de la GU será de gran interés para el desarrollo de una teoría sobre la facultad del lenguaje.

Palabras clave: Gramática Universal (GU), adquisición, sintaxis, tercera lengua, bilingües.

1. Introduction

Over the last several decades, the relationship between linguistic theory and language acquisition (second as well as first) has been an often-changing one: sometimes closely and directly linked, at other times hardly at all and most times indirectly. Probably, one of the reasons for this fluctuation may be due to the fast pace at which certain ideas within linguistic theory evolve; another reason could be traced to the often demanded need to obtain immediate pedagogical results. For a number of years there has been a growing body of research that specifically aims to tie together current linguistic theory and second language acquisition (SLA) research. The overall goal of this type of research, in which the focus on syntax surpasses all domains, is to create a conceptually and empirically well-grounded theory of SLA.

Hawkins (2001: xv) points out that when more than forty years ago researchers began to study how second languages were learned, one of the findings that attracted their attention was that the empirical evidence collected was in striking contrast with some so-called common-sense views of SLA. Specifically, the view that people learn what they are exposed to was disconfirmed by the evidence showing that L2 learners often do not learn the properties of the second language straightforwardly and, interestingly, sometimes they know things about the L2 which they have not encountered in the input at all. Another common-sense view was that speakers of different first languages (L1s) would acquire an L2 differently. Evidence suggested that this was not always the case: native speakers of typologically different languages often develop knowledge of a second language in a similar way.

There are several competing theories on how speakers come by the knowledge of non-native syntax (syntax understood as those properties which determine how sentences are construed) (cf. Braidì, 1999). This paper focuses on the Universal Grammar (henceforth UG) approach, put forward by Chomsky (1965, 1981, 1995, 2000 *et passim*), which assumes that humans have a genetically-determined capacity to acquire language (Anderson and Lightfoot, 2002). In line with the general topic of this special issue, our main goal in this contribution is to frame research on the acquisition of English L3 syntax within the UG approach and consider its potential value for future research. After providing an overview of the role of UG in language acquisition (sections 2 and 3) and presenting some general methodological issues (section 4) we will summarize two studies carried out with bilinguals learning English as their third language. We conclude, in line with Leung (2007), that the study of L3 syntax from a UG per-

spective, an issue not tackled until very recently, will be of great interest for the development of a theory of the language faculty.

2. Universal Grammar and L1 acquisition

Within the generative framework, the logical problem of L1 acquisition consists in accounting for the fact that linguistic data that are available to children are underdetermined in terms of the resultant adult grammar. Following Chomsky's work, it has been systematically assumed that children are equipped with an innate structure, UG, which consists of principles whose role is to limit the large range of possibilities which could be compatible with the data. In addition, in order to account for the range of variation present across languages, it has been proposed that there are also parametric options which are realized differently depending on the language. Consequently, principles of UG will guide the selection of the actual options which will in fact be triggered by the data. In Chomsky's words: the grammar of a language can be regarded as a particular set of values for the parameters, while the overall system of rules, principles and parameters is UG, which we may take to be one element of human biological endowment, namely the "language faculty" (Chomsky, 1982:7).

As White (2003:3) points out, the arguments for some sort of biological basis to L1 acquisition are well-known (cf. Pinker, 1994): (i) the language capacity is species specific; (ii) ability to acquire language is independent of intelligence (cf. Curtiss, 1988; Smith and Tsimpli, 1995); (iii) the pattern of acquisition is relatively uniform across different children, different languages and different cultures; (iv) language is acquired with relative ease and rapidity and without the benefit of instruction, and (v) children show creativity which goes beyond the input that they are exposed to. The major alternative to the innateness position is that language acquisition depends upon general cognitive principles not unique to language (cf. O'Grady, 2003). Other explanations based on imitation, correction and social interaction can be disregarded on the basis of evidence from child language acquisition. Obviously, this is not to deny that such exchanges are vital for building up the use of language, pragmatic competence, but UG theory aims to explain grammatical rather than pragmatic competence and principles of UG cannot be learned by social interaction.

The differential issue between UG and general cognitive explanations is the autonomy of the language faculty. The UG position does not deny that in actual use the production and comprehension of language depends upon other mental faculties and physical systems, although it is very difficult to disentangle them. An important argument for the modularity of the mind (generally assumed

modules are: lexical, computational –syntax, phonological, morphological and interpretive– is provided by *dissociation phenomena*: “The fact that knowledge of the syntactic properties of language can remain intact while other aspects of our mental activity are impaired, and that non-linguistic mental abilities can be normal while our knowledge of syntax is impaired”. (Hawkins, 2001: 9).

The dissociation of grammatical functions can be examined in cases where language ability and other cognitive abilities (e.g. reasoning or familiarity with mathematics) are disproportionate (cf. Christopher, the *savant* studied by Smith and Tsimpli, 1995). Curtiss (1988) describes several cases of people with severely impaired non-linguistic abilities who appear to have perfectly normal knowledge of syntax. A reverse kind of association is seen in individuals with Specific Language Impairment (Gopnik, 1997), a genetically determined disorder which selectively impairs grammatical competence (particularly the ability to produce morphological inflection according to rule-governed behaviour) while not affecting other cognitive functions. Acquisition of a first language is, for Chomsky, learning in a peculiar sense: it is not acquisition of information from outside the organism, as we acquire, for example, facts about history. It is internal development in response to vital, but comparatively trivial, experience from outside. Knowledge of language needs experience to mature; without it nothing would happen but the entire potential is there from the start. For Chomsky (1980: 134), language acquisition is more akin to growing than to learning: “In certain fundamental respects we do not really learn language; rather, grammar grows in the mind”.

3. Universal Grammar and the acquisition of second (L2) and third languages (L3)

The issue of *UG involvement in adult second language (L2) acquisition* has been intensely debated for almost two decades (Gregg, 2003; White, 1989; 2003). Some scholars are convinced that UG does not play a role in the process: Individuals who start learning a language after a certain maturational point clearly end up with language systems that are different from the grammars of native speakers (e.g. Bley-Vroman, 1990; Clahsen and Muysken, 1986; DeKeyser, 2000). And so, to the extent that there is some domain-specific quality of native language acquisition, it does not characterize adult L2 acquisition.

However, as mentioned above, from a UG perspective poverty of stimulus effects constitute robust evidence for positing the existence of an innate capacity and there is ample evidence in the L2 literature of those effects

(Herchensohn, 2000; Kanno, 1998; Martohardjono, 1993; Slabakova, 2001 and White, 2003 for a detailed explanation). In other words, L2 adults show knowledge of grammatical constraints that cannot be attributed to their native language, to the input, or, in the case of tutored learners, to instruction. So where does this grammatical knowledge come from then? L2 data of this kind point to the definite involvement of UG.

If the mechanisms which underlie grammar-building in L1 acquisition are innate, and give rise to observable similarities in the way that all children acquire their L1s, a reasonable *research strategy* for investigating SLA is to assume that the same innate mechanisms underlie second language grammar-building (Hawkins, 2001) By applying hypotheses about the principles and parameters of UG to observable patterns of L2 development, we can potentially confirm or disconfirm their involvement. Several theoretical and empirical arguments can be adduced for using generative theory to study the L2 grammar. Gregg (2003: 837) proposes to idealize the L2 grammar in order to study it, by assuming that it represents homogenous competence. His approach enables the L2 researcher to put aside the performance deficiencies of L2 learners in order to determine systematic aspects of the interlanguage. As he puts it:

If we are working toward an internalist theory [...], a theory of mental states and changes of state, while at the same time tentatively assuming that the set of adult L2 learners forms a natural kind, are we not ignoring the seemingly gross variation that obtains across learners? Yes, that's exactly what we're doing. Any theory, as a matter of course, idealizes over its subject matter. (Gregg, 2003: 837)

Another argument for the use of generative grammar as the theoretical framework to investigate SLA involves the complexity of L2 characteristics that may differ radically from the L1. The fact that an L2 learner is able to master an extremely complex system that involves not simply memorization of a lexicon, but a rich interplay of phonology and syntax suggests that there is more here than generalized cognitive learning. Finally, as Hawkins (2001: 327) points out, proposals about syntactic theory within the generative framework are explicit and allow the formulation of specific testable hypotheses about the nature of L2 knowledge. Applying the model to L2 provides a further window on the structure of linguistic knowledge in the mind, which complements the research carried out within the same framework on L1 acquisition and disordered native competence.

As for the question of *UG and the acquisition of third languages (L3)*, a recent paper by Leung (2007) rightly states that it is a field that has been relatively unexplored. Most research within the generative framework has dismissed the role intermediary languages might play in development entirely. In the last

five years, some generative non-native language acquisition studies have arisen that explicitly aim to deal with L3, including Lozano (2003), Flynn, Foley and Vinnitskaya (2004), Koster (2005) and Leung (2005). At the University of the Basque Country, my own work with colleagues or their own work has looked at different syntactic aspects of the acquisition of English as an L3 by Basque-Spanish bilingual learners (cf. García Mayo, 2003b, 2006; García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola, 2005; García Mayo, Lázaro Ibarrola and Licerias, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006; Gutiérrez and García Mayo, 2007; Lázaro Ibarrola, 2002; Lázaro Ibarrola and García Mayo, 2006; Perales Haya, 2004; Perales Haya, García Mayo and Licerias, 2004, 2007; Perales Haya, Licerias and García Mayo, 2004; Villareal Olaizola and García Mayo, 2006, 2007). This recent work testifies to the increasing interest of generative acquisition researchers in the domain of L3. We agree with Leung when she states that if one accepts that the study of second language acquisition processes can contribute to linguistic theory, then obviously the study of the acquisition of a third language could contribute one step further. The study of L3 acquisition helps us extend the range of languages studied and further explore the nature of the language faculty and will hopefully provide “an exciting pathway to further theory building” (Leung 2007: 109).

4. Some notes on methodological issues

The type of research conducted on L2/L3 interlanguage from a UG perspective seeks to establish the nature of learners' linguistic competence, focusing on the issue of whether or not this interlanguage is UG-constrained. But, as is well-known, linguistic competence is an abstraction and to this day there is no method that allows the researcher to tap it directly. Several researchers (García Mayo, 2003a; Gass, 2001; White, 2003) have emphasized the need to resort to various kinds of performance measures in order to indirectly determine the characteristics of mental grammatical representations. White (2003: 17) classifies data into three categories: (i) production data, including spontaneous and elicited production; (ii) comprehension data, including data obtained from act-out and picture-identification tasks; and (iii) intuitional data, including data from grammaticality judgments and truth value judgments, as well as a number of online techniques such as sentence matching. Although there is no one methodology that is appropriate for investigating all aspects of linguistic competence, researchers encourage the use of various methods (triangulation) to further support conclusions.

The data reported in this paper belong to the REAL (Research in English Applied Linguistics <http://www.ehu.es/depfi/real/index.html>) database, which con-

tains —up to this date— oral and written production of approximately 800 bilinguals (Basque-Spanish) who learn English as their L3 in different schools, that is, their only exposure to the foreign language occurs in an instructional setting. The data collection started back in 1996 and is still under way funded by different research projects throughout the years (PS95-0025, PB97-0611, BFF2000-0101, 9/UPV 00103.130-13578/2001, BFF2003-04009-C02-01, HUM2006-09775-C02-01/FILO).

In what follows I will highlight the main results obtained in two already published studies (García Mayo, Lázaro Ibarrola and Liceras, 2005; 2006 for details) in order to show how a specific theoretical proposal may illuminate our understanding of non-native structures in L3 English oral data.

5. Placeholders in English as an L3

5.1 A cross-sectional study

When analyzing the oral production of the participants in our study, students between the ages of 7 and 15, there were two systematic syntactic phenomena that attracted our attention and for which an explanation was needed, namely (a) insertion of *is* before lexical verbs (both transitive and intransitive), as in (1):

- (1) a. the kid *is* open the door
- b. the boy *is* came
- c. the boy and the reindeer *is* run
- d. the boy and the dog *is* sit down

and (b) insertion of a subject personal pronoun, mainly *he*, before a lexical verb (both transitive and intransitive). This pronoun doubles the determiner phrase (DP) subject that already appears overtly in the sentence, as illustrated in (2):

- (2) a. the wolf *he* opened the door
- b. the father and the woman *they* love

Following previous literature (Fuller and Gundel, 1987; Ionin and Wexler, 2002 and Radford, 1988, among others), we referred to these two types of lexical items in these specific positions as placeholders *is* and *he*.

Kato (1999) put forward a proposal arguing for a reanalysis of weak and strong pronouns following the tenets of the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995). She made an initial distinction between these two types of pronouns and assumed that the universal inventory of weak pronouns (Table 1) is made up of

(a) free weak pronouns, as in English, (b) clitic pronouns, as in French, and (c) agreement pronominal affixes, as in Spanish and Basque, the languages of our participants. Following this proposal, Spanish and Basque agreement morphemes are equivalent to English free weak pronouns and the only difference between them is that free weak pronouns can appear independently, whereas agreement morphemes have to be adjoined to the verb.

LANGUAGES	WEAK PRONOUN	
<i>English</i>	<i>Free</i>	<i>I, you, he, she, it, we, they</i>
<i>French</i>	<i>Clitic</i>	<i>Je, tu, il, elle, nous, vous, ils, elles</i>
<i>Spanish</i>	<i>Agreement morphemes</i>	<i>-o, -s, Ø, -mos, -is, -n</i>
<i>Basque</i>	<i>Agreement morphemes</i>	<i>-t, -zu, -k, Ø, -gu, -zue, -te</i>

Table 1. Weak pronouns

We should keep in mind that, although Spanish and Basque are languages with very different origins (Ortiz de Urbina, 1989), the former a Latin-based language, and the latter a language with non-Indo-European roots, both share the following characteristics:

(i) they both belong to the group of null-subject languages (Jaeggli, 1982). Spanish and Basque, unlike English, allow missing subjects (*Llegaron a las seis / Seietan iritsi siren / *Arrived at six*), free subject-verb inversion (*Han venido mis amigos / Etorri dira nire lagunak / *Have come my friends*), and apparent violations of the so-called *that*-trace filter (*¿Quién dijiste que llegó tarde? / Nor esan zenuen berandu iritsi zela? (*Who did you say that arrived late?)*)

(ii) they have a rich morphological paradigm with temporal and person morphemes present in both languages.

Thus, taking Kato's theoretical proposal as a starting point, which is simplified to the extreme here for space constraints, and assuming the role that both UG principles and the learners' L1s play in shaping new input data (Schwartz and Sprouse, 1996), we predicted that our learners would transfer the characteristics of the agreement morphemes of their L1s. Specifically, we expected:

a. English weak pronouns working as agreement morphemes and realizing agreement overtly. This will be expected if the participants establish a parallelism between Spanish and Basque agreement morphemes and English weak pronouns.

b. English free weak pronouns co-occurring with a DP subject, as in the participants' L1s, where DP subjects co-occur with agreement morphemes.

Our data came from the spontaneous oral production of 58 bilinguals who had been exposed to the same amount of formal instruction to English at the time of data collection: approximately 396 hours during four school years. Table 2 provides the relevant information:

Table 2: Participants in the study

	Age at first exposure	Age at testing
Group 1 (n = 20)	4-5	7-8 (mean = 7.3)
Group 2 (n = 20)	8-9	12-13 (mean = 11.3)
Group 3 (n = 18)	11-12	14-15 (mean = 14.2)

Each participant narrated two stories: the first, the well-known “Frog, where are you?” (Berman and Slobin, 1994), common to the three groups; the second story varied depending on the age group. The participants narrated the stories depicted in the vignettes individually. Their production was audio-taped and later transcribed and codified in CHILDES (MacWhinney, 1991) format.

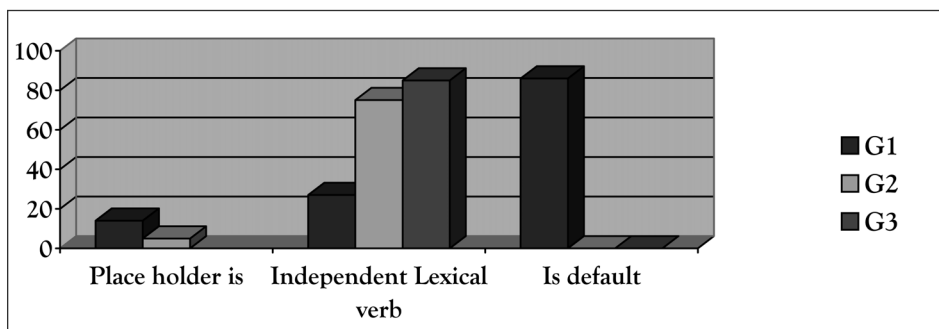


Figure 1. Independent pronouns and inflectional marks

The analysis of the oral production confirmed the hypotheses in (a) and (b) above (for specific details see García Mayo *et al.* (2005: 459-467): what we showed was that Kato’s (1999) typology of weak pronouns provides a valid framework for analyzing the different ways in which the participants approach the input data in the foreign language. As can be graphically seen in Figures 1 and 2, in what seems to be an age factor effect, not in terms of overall proficiency (they were all classified as beginners) but in terms of structuring the input, the

youngest learners use placeholder *is* coexisting with an overwhelming use of instances of *is* default (as in ‘the frog and the dog *is* going’), a very low occurrence of independent lexical verbs (cf. Figure 1) and a total lack of personal subject pronouns (cf. Figure 2). The learners in Group 2 show a significant increase in the use of independent lexical verbs, no *is* default (cf. Figure 1), placeholder *he* and *he* default (as in ‘the mother *he* is on the tree’), together with other subject pronouns. Finally, the older learners, those in Group 3, show a significant decrease in the use of placeholders *he*, a practically null occurrence of placeholder *is* and a significant increase both in the use independent lexical verbs and of subject pronouns.

The fact that there is never any lexical material between placeholders *is* and *he* and the verbs provides strong evidence that these learners are using these lexical items in their L3 as the agreement morphemes in Basque and Spanish. It is true that the actual number of learners who make use of placeholders *is* and *he* is low but this may be for several reasons: ours are production data and we have no way of knowing whether the participants that have not used placeholders at the time of their individual interview might have used them at some other point in their oral production. Also, it is well known that not all children proceed through the same stages when learning their L1 or their L2. When referring specifically to placeholders, not all children produce them in the acquisition of English as their L1, so we would not expect L3 learners to produce them across the board either.

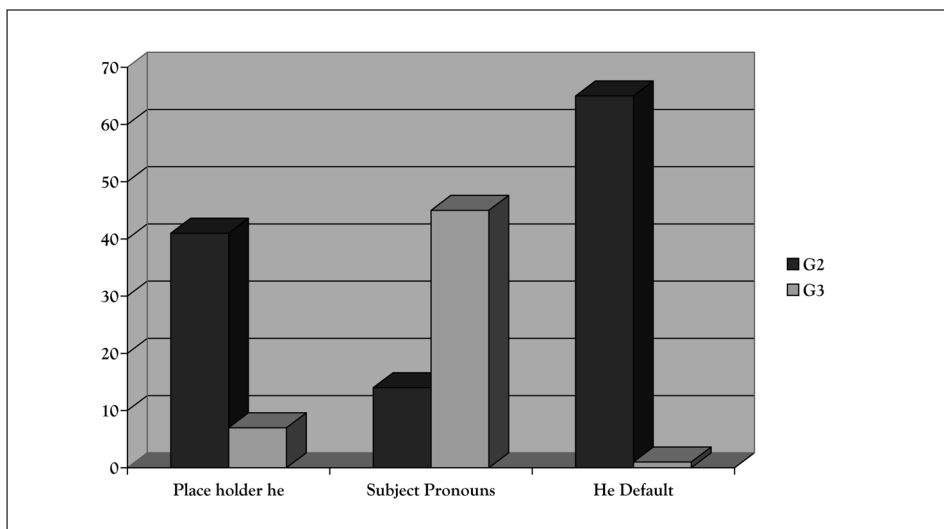


Figure 2. Independent pronouns and inflectional marks

5.2. A longitudinal study

In a follow-up study, García Mayo *et al.* (2006) analyzed the oral production of the 20 subjects in Group 2 (cf. Table 2 above) adopting Kato's proposal again but considering the data at two different points in time. At Time 1 the learners had been exposed to English for 4 years (approximately 396 hours) and at Time 2 for 6 years (approximately 594 hours). In this case we focused on the status of subject pronouns in the learners' interlanguage and considered the use of independent pronouns, placeholder *he* and the use of self-corrections and pauses between subject and verb at the two points in time. Table 3 shows that there is a contrast between the use of independent pronouns at Time 1 (8.04%) and Time 2 (41.50%). The non-existence of self-corrections and the use of just two pauses at Time 1 seems to be related with the high percentage of use of placeholder *he* (41.50%). It would seem as if, as claimed in the previous study, the pronoun *he* were used as a placeholder of the agreement morphemes of the participants' L1s.

Table 6: Changes in the pronominal system

	Independent pronouns	Placeholder <i>he</i>	Self-corrections	Pauses
Time 1	30/373 = 8.04%	22/53=41.50%	0	2
Time 2	141/544=25.91%	32/167=19.16%	9	11

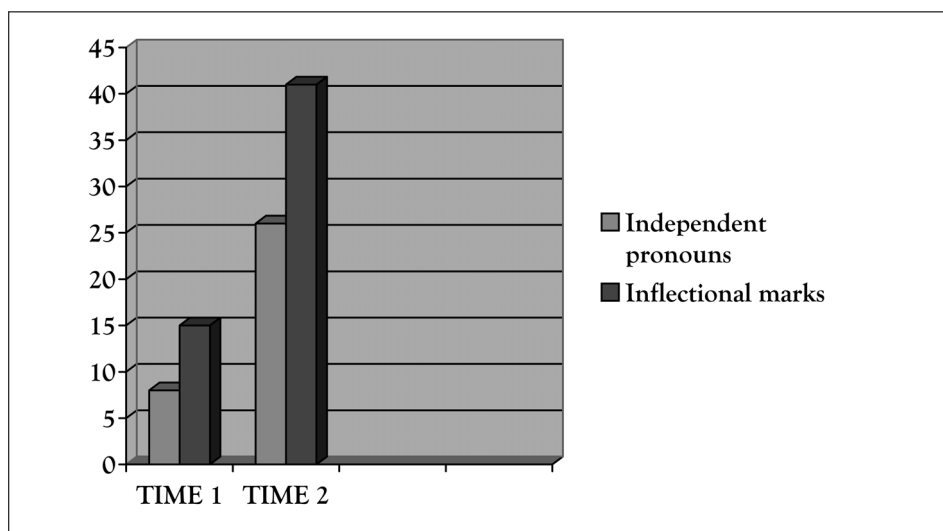


Figure 3. Independent pronouns and inflectional marks

At Time 2, however, the entire pronominal system appears in the performance of the participants (in the sense that there are instances of all personal pronouns attested in their oral production) and English pronouns seem to become independent. That is, there seems to be a change in the status of subject pronouns in the English L3 of our participants from Time 1 to Time 2: from agreement morphemes to independent lexical items. At Time 2 most pronouns (80.84%) are no longer analyzed as adjoined to the verb but, rather, as free elements, although they might still constitute the morphological realization of agreement morphemes. But, will this change in status have any impact on inflection? Will the learners pay more attention to inflection once the pronominal system has been restructured? Figure 3 below illustrates the different results and the analyses carried out showed that there is a statistically significant change ($p < 0.0001$) in the distribution of inflection from Time 1 to Time 2 suggesting that the participants in this study start to pay attention to English morphology only when they have reanalyzed English pronouns as free elements.

The data from the use of independent pronouns and inflection indicate that there is a relationship between the acquisition of independent subject pronouns and inflectional forms: there is a significant (test statistic 15.1536, $p = 0.042$) strong positive linear relationship (Pearson's correlation coefficient = 0.998) between the production of subject pronouns and inflected forms. In other words, the misanalysis of English pronouns due to structural transfer seems to delay the acquisition of English inflectional forms.

6. Final remarks

This paper has provided a brief overview of the role of UG in language acquisition, focusing specifically on the until very recently unexplored area of the acquisition of L3 syntax from the theoretical perspective provided by generative theory. We have referred to recent work on this issue and focused on two pieces of recently published research on the L3 English interlanguage of Basque-Spanish bilinguals.

Our main goal within this special issue was to frame research on L3 syntax within the generative paradigm and to argue for the potential it has to analyze L3 data. The ultimate goal of this research would be to test whether UG would be still operating when there are three or more languages involved. We believe, together with Leung (2007), that this is indeed a promising research area and that it will undoubtedly contribute to further theory building.

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