

Past tenses in narrative production. How do advanced speakers of Spanish as a second language compare to native speakers?

Tiempos del pasado en producciones narrativas. Comparación entre hablantes avanzados de español como segunda lengua y hablantes nativos

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Abstract

Past tense acquisition presents a challenge for learners of Spanish as a second language (L2). Previous research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has primarily focused on the paradigmatic relationships between simple past tenses (*cantó* and *cantaba*) where the change of form entails a change of meaning. The paradigmatic relationships that exist between different tenses to express the same meaning, as well as verbal tense polysemy, have received less attention. To address these gaps, we introduce the Function-Meaning-Form model, and we apply it to analyze a corpus of written narratives, produced by L1 and advanced L2 Spanish speakers, based on a film excerpt. Through this analysis, we explore tense polysemy and investigate differences between advanced and native speakers in handling this phenomenon. Our findings reveal a significant difference between groups in their approach to verbal tense polysemy.

Keywords: corpus analysis, pragmatics, polysemy, second language acquisition, verb tenses in Spanish

Resumen

La adquisición de los tiempos verbales del pasado en español como segunda lengua (L2) presenta desafíos. Las investigaciones previas se han centrado en las relaciones paradigmáticas entre los tiempos simples, donde el cambio de forma implica un cambio de significado. Se ha prestado menos atención a las relaciones paradigmáticas entre

diferentes tiempos para expresar el mismo significado y a la polisemia de los tiempos. Para abordar estas lagunas, presentamos el modelo Función-Significado-Forma y lo aplicamos a un corpus de narraciones escritas producidas por hablantes nativos (L1) y hablantes avanzados de L2, basado en un fragmento de película. Exploramos la polisemia temporal e investigamos las diferencias entre los grupos en el manejo de este fenómeno. Nuestros hallazgos revelan diferencias significativas entre los hablantes L1 y L2 en el enfoque de la polisemia de los tiempos.

Palabras clave: adquisición de una segunda lengua, análisis de corpus, pragmática, polisemia, tiempos verbales del español

Introduction

Previous studies show that the acquisition of past tense poses a challenge in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; González, 2003; Izquierdo, 2009; Salaberry, 2011; Slabakova y Montrul, 2002), especially in Spanish, where much of the studies have focused on the contrast between simple past tenses imperfect (*cantaba*) and preterite (*cantó*). However, these tenses are usually studied in a paradigmatic relationship, where the change of form entails a change of meaning (see examples 1, 2 and 3), rather than a syntagmatic relationship (see example 4), which is the more frequent situation in natural speech. Furthermore, the role of pragmatic factors in tense choice and verb tense polysemy has not received sufficient attention in the field. While previous studies have identified polysemy as a challenge in SLA (Crossley, Salsbury & McNamara, 2010; Elston-Güttler & Williams, 2008), only a few studies have explored tense polysemy (Howard, 2005) by examining the paradigmatic relationship that exists between different tenses to express the same meaning (see example 5).

- (1) Los barcos **llegaban/llegaron** cada media hora (González, 2003).
- (2) Juan **alcanzaba / alcanzó** la cima (Slabakova & Montrul, 2002).
- (3) La tierra **temblaba / tembló** muy fuerte (Izquierdo, 2009).
- (4) La chica **dijo** que **era** inocente.
- (5) Vio que la chica **robaba / estaba robando** un pan.

The Function-Meaning-Form (FMF) model (Cruz Enríquez, 2019), which constitutes the framework of this study, has been developed to address these gaps in research. This semantic-pragmatic model provides a comprehensive contrastive analysis of verb tenses by investigating the influence of tense, grammatical aspect, and lexical aspect on the selection and interpretation of verbal

forms to convey specific meanings in different contexts. The model is useful to study the acquisition of tenses in a second language (L2) and to analyze the differences in verb tense acquisition among different types of speakers. It may also be applied to the teaching of verb tenses in the L2 classroom (Alba de la Fuente & Cruz Enríquez, 2023).

In this article, we present the FMF model and its application as a tool to analyse spontaneous speech production in a sample analysis of written narratives produced by 16 native speakers (L1) and 16 L2 advanced speakers of Spanish based on a fragment of the film *Modern Times* by Charles Chaplin (1936). This fragment has been used in previous studies (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998; Hasbún, 1995) and has been shown to elicit propositions from all the functions, meanings, and tenses that are relevant to our study. By using the FMF model, we seek to explore the polysemy of verb tenses, examine the role of pragmatic factors in tense selection, and investigate the extent to which advanced speakers differ from native speakers in these areas.

A semantic-pragmatic model to study the acquisition and use of verb tenses

In this section, we will outline the key aspects of the Function-Meaning-Form (FMF) model that are relevant to this paper. Although space constraints prevent us from covering all the details of the model, interested readers can consult (Cruz Enríquez, 2019) for a more comprehensive overview of the proposal.

The FMF model will be used in this article to analyze past verb tenses. This model was developed for this purpose in (Cruz Enríquez, 2019), drawing inspiration from the theory of enunciation (Benveniste, 1966; Weinrich, 1973) and Halliday's functionalist approach (1985), specifically his differentiation between external (objectivity, materiality) and internal (subjectivity, conscience) experience. This model allows for the classification of the various contextual uses of past verb tenses into four narrative functions, while also distinguishing between their semantic and pragmatic meanings. Furthermore, the FMF model examines both the paradigmatic (*in absentia*) and syntagmatic (*in praesentia*) relationships of verb tenses and considers the three relevant categories for understanding temporality: tense, grammatical aspect, and lexical aspect.

In terms of tense, the model incorporates two reference points. First, the grammatical point R, as revised by Lareau (2008, 2011) and Vet (2007) building on Reichenbach's original model (1947), captures grammatical temporal

relations and encompasses the fundamental semantic meaning. Additionally, the model introduces the narrative point N, proposed by Cruz Enríquez and Lareau (Submitted), which represents contextual temporal relations and captures the pragmatic sense. Regarding grammatical aspect, the model considers the primary aspectual phases: perfective (*ha cantado, había cantado*), progressive (*está cantando, estaba cantando*), and prospective (*va a cantar, iba a cantar*), as outlined by Dik (1987).

With respect to lexical aspect, the model employs a two-way distinction proposed by Cruz Enríquez (2022) that categorizes verbs into narrative and commentative. This distinction relates lexical aspect to syntactic context (type of proposition), verb polysemy, and verbal morphology, offering insights into the interaction between lexical and grammatical elements. Narrative processes encompass the events that can be organized in a chronological sequence, representing new information and serving as the foreground of the narration. On the other hand, commentative processes lack inherent finiteness and cannot be ordered chronologically or placed within a narrative sequence. However, they have the potential to be projected into a narrative and can appear in the background.

One of the most significant features of the FMF model is its four narrative functions, which enable researchers to examine the polysemy, or contextual uses, of verb tenses. Traditional approaches often divide narrative into two grounds: foreground and background. In the FMF, the foreground corresponds to the first function (F1), while the background is divided into three functions, as shown in Table 1. This division helps us study the meanings associated with each form in each context, which is crucial for a thorough analysis of a text.

TABLE 1. GROUNDING IN TRADITIONAL APPROACHES VERSUS FUNCTIONS IN FMF MODEL.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES	IN THE FUNCTION-MEANING-FORM MODEL
Foreground	Function 1. Sequence of narrative processes
Background	Function 2. Projection of commentary material to the background
	Function 3. Timeframe
	Function 4. Real-time narrative (from a character's perspective)

Function 1 (F1) corresponds to the foreground and focuses on narrative processes that occur in chronological order. Each event is synchronous to a narrative reference point N, and each event follows its predecessor, creating the storyline (see 6).

- (6) La chica **robó** una barra de pan y **huyó**. Luego **tropezó** con Chaplin y ambos **cayeron** al suelo.

‘The girl stole_{PERF} a loaf of bread and ran_{PERF} away. She then bumped_{PERF} into Chaplin and they both fell_{PERF} to the ground.’

Functions 2 to 4 cover the background of the narration and involve semantic contrasts between different verb tenses. Function 2 (F2) involves the projection of the material of the commentary enunciation to the background, such as characters’ thoughts, ideas, and conversations. Reported speech is illustrative of this function (see 7).

- (7) La chica dijo **que era inocente**.
‘The girl said she was_{IMPERF} innocent.’

Function 3 (F3), the narrative’s temporal framework, provides a background for processes in the foreground. The events are presented in one of their aspectual phases, such as perfective (8) and progressive (9), and serve as temporal references for a main event from the narrative sequence (F1).

- (8) **Cuando terminó de comer**, llamó a un policía.
‘When he finished_{PERF} eating, he called a policeman.’
(9) **Cuando corría**, tropezó con Chaplin.
‘When she ran_{IMPERF} (was running), she bumped into Chaplin.’

Finally, function 4 (F4) contains real-time narration told from a character’s perspective, thus adding a subjective element to the narrative. It is a narrative option that separates the main plot from a side story that unfolds alongside it, as it is witnessed or imagined by the characters. For example, all events in the narrative sequence in (10) are imagined by Chaplin.

- (10) Chaplin **tomaba** la leche de una vaca, se **comía** unas uvas del patio y luego él y la chica **se sentaban** a comer.
‘Chaplin drank_{IMPERF} milk from a cow, ate_{IMPERF} some grapes from the yard, and then he and the girl sat_{IMPERF} down to eat.’

So, in terms of meaning, the FMF model considers tense, type of processes, and subjectivity. With respect to tense, since we want to study the different contextual uses of verbal tenses, we focus on the relation between the event (E) and the narrative reference point (N). These relations may be of anteriority, synchronicity,

or posteriority. In this paper, we will focus on anteriority and synchronicity. As for the type of processes, we classify events as commentative, narrative, or aspectual phases of a narrative process (progressive, prospective, perfect).

Subjectivity is a pragmatic trait that has a positive value when facts are presented from a character's perspective. We already showed in (10) an example from F4. Another example can be found in F2, when what characters see, hear, or find out is presented in nominal sentences, as shown in (11). Note that the imperfect is used in this example to express the progressive phase (*was stealing*).

- (11) Vio que la chica **robaba** un pan.
 'He saw the girl steal_{IMPERF} a loaf.'

Table 2 summarizes the four functions, their corresponding verb forms, and their associated meanings. As we can see, each meaning represents a different combination of values associated with each category. Also, a particular form may appear in different functions, and one function may have multiple associated meanings.

TABLE 2. FUNCTIONS, MEANINGS, AND FORMS IN THE FMF MODEL.

FUNCTION	TENSE (E/N)	PROCESS	SUBJECTIVE	FORM
F1	synchronous	narrative	-	<i>cantó</i>
F2	synchronous	commentative	-	<i>cantaba</i>
		progressive phase	+	<i>cantaba, estaba cantando</i>
		perfect phase	+/-	<i>había cantado</i>
	anterior	narrative	-	<i>cantó, había cantado</i>
F3	synchronous	fase perfecta	-	<i>cantó</i>
		fase progresiva	-	<i>cantaba</i>
F4	synchronous	narrative	+	<i>cantaba</i>

In Table 2, we have highlighted in bold the cases where *cantaba* and *cantó* hold a paradigmatic relationship with another indicative form to express the same meaning. These contexts will be the focus of this article, as we will further develop in the following section.

The study

The second goal of this paper is to demonstrate a practical application of the Form-Meaning-Function (FMF) model through the analysis of written narratives produced by L1 and advanced L2 Spanish speakers. To achieve this

objective, we conducted an exploratory study that analyzed a corpus of written narratives produced by 16 L1 and 16 advanced L2 speakers of Spanish.

Participants

All participants were recruited in the Montreal area. To collect the data, we had the approval of the TÉLUQ University's Research Ethics Committee. To preserve participants' anonymity, we replaced their names with a code beginning with the letters "ESL1" or "ESL2AVFR" and a unique number (e.g., ESL1001).

For the control group, we specifically chose native speakers of a dialect of Spanish which includes the *cantó-ha cantado* contrast in their grammars, in order to ensure that the absence of this contrast did not affect the use of past tenses, specifically with respect to the use of *cantó* vs *había cantado* in background contexts. We selected participants from Cuba (n = 11), Spain (n = 3), and Mexico (n = 2). Their median age was 47 years (range: 34-70). We verified that all participants in this group had grown up as monolinguals and did not learn any other languages during their childhood. To avoid any possible influence of French on their grammar, we only recruited L1 speakers who were either still monolingual or had been residing in Montreal for no more than five years. Seven participants reported fluency in French, but Spanish was their primary language of use.

The L2 advanced group consisted of individuals born in the province of Quebec, with French as their native language, who were not simultaneous or sequential bilinguals in French and another language (e.g., French-English). They acquired Spanish as adults through formal instruction in a classroom setting. They were recruited by the authors of the article as part of a course within a Quebec university curriculum. The average age of this group was 30.8 years (range: 21-67).

To assess their proficiency level in Spanish, participants were administered an adaptation of the DELE proficiency test developed by researchers at McGill University, which has been used in multiple SLA studies to measure general knowledge of vocabulary and grammar (for example, Slabakova and Montrul, 2002). Only participants who scored a minimum of 40 out of 50 points were selected to participate in the study. The average score was 46 (range: 42-50). Therefore, participants form a homogeneous group in terms of proficiency.

The task

For the data collection, we used a written narrative task based on an 8-minute excerpt from the silent film *Modern Times*, by Chaplin (1936), which has been used

in previous studies on tense acquisition (Hasbún, 1995; Bardovi-Harlig, 1998). We chose this excerpt because it offers a sequence of events that is ideal for analyzing the narrative sequence of the foreground, as well as simultaneous actions and scene changes that allow for the analysis of the background, including character descriptions, feelings, and thoughts. Additionally, the excerpt includes a scene in which the characters fantasize what it would be like to live together in a nice house and is likely to be narrated from the character's perspective. In sum, this excerpt is useful to elicit propositions from all the target functions, meanings and tenses. The chosen 8-minute excerpt (from minute 35:16 to minute 43:28) begins with the scene entitled *Alone and hungry* and has five scenarios, each with different events and actions:

- On the street: this scene includes the theft of a loaf of bread by a poor girl, and the girl's arrest;
- In the cafeteria: Chaplin's character, the Tramp, eats everything he wants and does not pay the bill, so he is arrested by a policeman;
- In the police truck: the Tramp meets the girl who stole the bread;
- On the street: the characters manage to escape and sit in front of a house;
- Inside the house: (as part of their imagination) the characters fantasize about a bucolic domestic scene.

Before presenting the excerpt to the participants, we provided them with background information about the main characters that would allow them to complement the background in the narration. For instance, they were informed that the protagonist had recently been released from prison and wanted to go back as he was jobless and, at least, he had a guaranteed source of food there, while the female character was homeless and an orphan. Participants were shown the entire excerpt twice and then asked to write a narrative of what they saw, in the past tense, attempting to include as many details as possible about the events in the excerpt, and to avoid using present tense. To encourage the use of past tense, we suggested that they start their narrative with the phrase *Once upon a time*, as other researchers have done in previous studies on tense acquisition (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998, among others; Hasbún, 1995). Additionally, they were encouraged to include descriptions of the characters' thoughts and feelings during the excerpt.

Research questions

Our main objective is to analyze how L1 and L2 speakers deal with polysemy, specifically focusing on the contextual uses of *cantaba* and *cantó*, which are the

most polysemous past forms. For this reason, we will concentrate on functions 2 and 3, where these forms appear in a paradigmatic relationship with other past tense forms of the indicative to express the same meanings. Please refer to examples (12) and (13), where *cantó* expresses, respectively, a narrative process prior to N in F2 and the perfective phase of a process in F3. Note that, in (12), *había cantado* is also commonly used, while in (13), *hubo cantado* was often used.

- (12) El panadero le dijo al policía que la chica **robó** un pan (ESL1001)
'The baker **told** the policeman that the girl **stole** (had stolen) a loaf of bread.'
- (13) y cuando la policía **llegó** para arrestarla, explicó que era él el que había robado el pan. (ESL2AVFR006)
'and when the policeman **arrived** to arrest her, he explained that it was him who had stolen the bread.'

Regarding *cantaba*, please refer to examples (14) and (15), where this form expresses, in functions 2 and 3, the progressive phase of a process. In the case of (14), in F2, this usage seems to be exclusive to clauses that present events from the perspective of a character and are often subordinate to perception verbs such as “ver” (to see), “observar” (to observe), and “notar” (to notice).

- (14) Observaron que los moradores **salían**. (ESL1004)
'(They) observed that the dwellers **left** (were leaving).'
- (15) Mientras el policía **se llevaba** a la muchacha, el hombre entró a un restaurante (L1ES02)
'While the policeman **took (was taking)** the girl away, the man entered a restaurant.'

Therefore, our research question is as follows: To what extent do L1 and L2 speakers resemble each other in terms of the use of *cantó* and *cantaba* when these forms are in a paradigmatic relationship with other indicative past tense forms to express the same meaning?

Codification and analysis

In our study, we coded, analyzed, and presented the results based on the three pillars that articulate the model: form, contextual meaning (or use/value of the verbal form), and function (of the verbal form in discourse).

In the codification and analysis phase of the study, a total of 2507 clauses were collected, of which 2254 were analyzed. All indicative tenses were analyzed except for modal uses, such as conditional in cases where the temporal meaning of posteriority was absent, as in example (16).

- (16) Dijo que le **gustaría** tener una casa así.
‘He/she said that he/she **would like** to have a house like that.’

We excluded almost all non-personal forms of the verb from analysis, including infinitives, participles, and gerunds, as well as all subjunctive forms (e.g., *que cante*, *que cantara*, *que hubiera cantado*, etc.), as the main focus of this paper is to examine and contrast the uses of *cantaba* and *cantó* with other indicative tenses, more specifically with other past forms (e.g. *estaba cantando*, *había cantado*, *hubo cantado*).

The collected clauses were classified according to the three axes that constitute the building blocks of the FMF: narrative function (F1, F2, F3, F4), meaning (tense, aspectual aspect, aspectual phases) and form (*cantaba*, *cantó*, *estaba cantando*, *había cantado*). Statistical analysis was performed, including Pearson’s chi-square test, using the R programming language (R Core Team, 2022).

Results

We present the results from two perspectives: first, we consider the target forms (*cantó* and *cantaba*) and examine the different meanings each one expresses (e.g., *cantó* and its distribution to express a synchronous or an anterior narrative process, or a perfect phase of a process; *cantaba* and its distribution to express commentative, narrative, or progressive processes); and second, we explore the meaning-to-form relationships (e.g., an anterior narrative process expressed by *cantó* or *había cantado*; a progressive synchronous process expressed by *cantaba* or *estaba cantando*). Both analyses are essential to understand the polysemy of *cantó* and *cantaba*. Investigating the contexts where these forms deviate from their basic sense and compete with other forms to convey the same meaning allows for a more comprehensive understanding of their multiple meanings.

Figure 1 shows the overall distribution of verb forms used in the written sample. As we can see, both groups made use of a range of forms to create different meanings. Note that the most frequently used form is *cantó*, followed by *cantaba*.

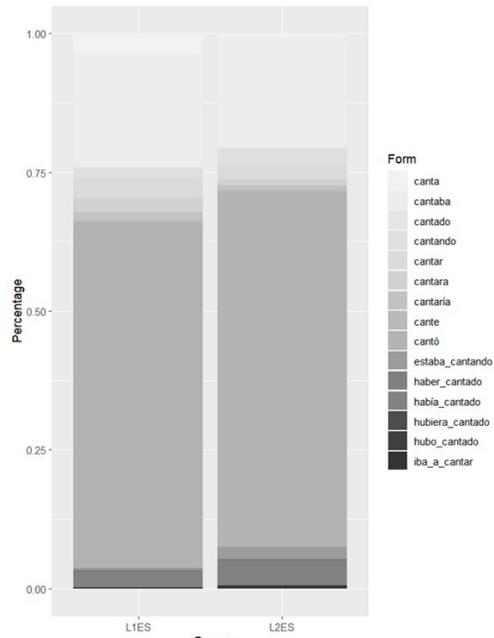


Figure 1. Overall distribution of verb forms in the sample.

For both groups, *cantó* appears primarily in Function 1 (F1), while *cantaba* is predominantly used in Function 2 (F2). In the case of *cantaba*, it is mainly employed to express a commentative process (e.g., “dijo que era inocente” – ‘she said she was innocent’). However, our focus is to compare both groups regarding the percentages of usage for these two forms to express different meanings. We examine this in more detail below.

Regarding *cantó*, let us recall the meanings that this form can have in functions 1, 2 and 3: in F1, it designates a narrative process synchronous to the narrative point N; in F2, it designates a narrative process anterior to narrative point N (see example 17); and in F3, it designates a process in its perfect phase (see 18).

- (17) La señora **dijo-F1** que la chica **robó-F2** una barra de pan.
 ‘The lady **said** that the girl **stole** (had stolen) a loaf of bread.’
- (18) Cuando **terminó** de comer, llamó a un policía.
 ‘When he **finished** eating, he called a policeman.’

As shown in Figure 2, we find that this form is used in the three functions where it may appear. Of the three functions, it predominantly corresponds to F1, which is to be expected, as it is the most common function in the sample.

The difference in the distribution of *cantó* across the three functions between L1 and L2 is statistically significant, as indicated by a Pearson's chi-square test ($p < .001$). This disparity arises from the fact that L1 speakers employ *cantó* more frequently than L2 speakers in the F2.

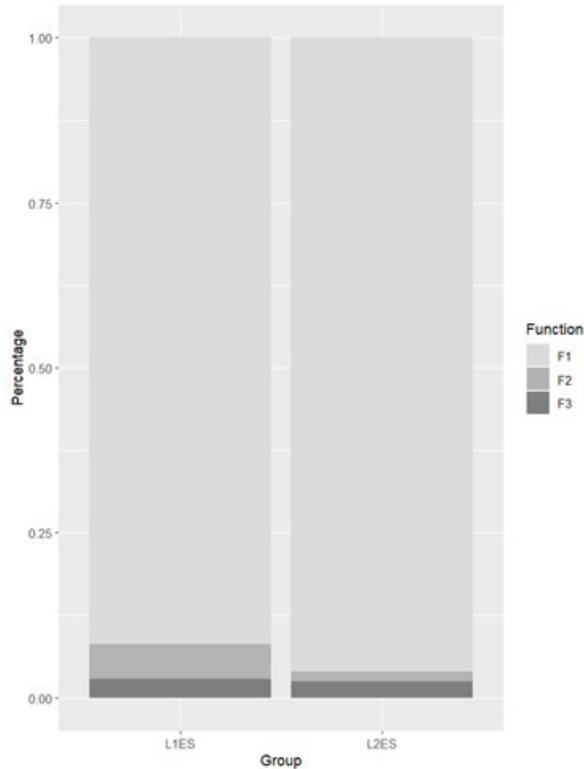


Figure 2. Distribution of *cantó* in functions F1, F2 and F3

In F2, there is competition between *cantó* (see 19) and *había cantado* (see 20) to express the same meaning.

- (19) El panadero le dijo al policía que la chica **robó** un pan. (ESL1001)
 ‘The baker **told** the policeman that the girl **stole** (had stolen) a loaf of bread.’
- (20) Una mujer avisó la policía que (la chica) **había robado** un pan. (ESL2A-VFR006)
 ‘A woman **warned** the policeman that (the girl) **had stolen** a loaf of bread.’

Figure 3 shows the distribution of *cantó* and *había cantado* in F2 to express a narrative process anterior to N.

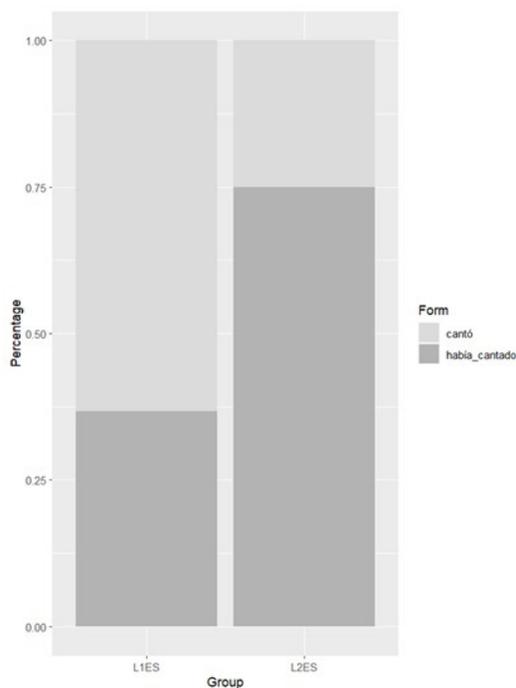


Figure 3. Distribution of *cantó* and *había cantado* to express anteriority in F2

We found that L2 speakers seem to prefer the form *había cantado* in this function (75 %), whereas L1 speakers prefer to use *cantó* (63 % for *cantó* and 37 % for *había cantado*). Statistically, the difference between the groups is significant according to a Pearson's chi-square test ($p < .001$).

Regarding *cantaba*, let us recall the meanings associated with this form in functions 2, 3 and 4. In all three functions, *cantaba* designates a process that is synchronous to the narrative point N. However, in F2, it can be used with commentative processes (example 21) or to express the progressive phase of a process (example 22). In F3, it is used to indicate a progressive phase (example 23), and, in F4, it is employed with narrative processes (example 24).

- (21) El hombre dijo que **era** él el ladrón. (ESL1003)
 ‘The man said he **was** the thief.’
- (22) Observaron que los moradores **salían**. (ESL1004)
 ‘They observed that the residents **were leaving**.’
- (23) Mientras el policía **se llevaba** a la muchacha, el hombre entró a un restaurante. (L1ES02)
 ‘While the policeman took_{IMPERF} the girl away, the man entered a restaurant.’

- (24) Chaplin **se comía** unas frutas, **llamaba** a la vaca para que le diera leche y **se sentaba** a comer con la huérfana. (ESL2AVFR008)
 ‘Chaplin ate_{IMPERF} some fruit, called_{IMPERF} the cow to give him milk and sat_{IMPERF} down to eat with the orphan.’

As depicted in Figure 4, we observe that *cantaba* is used in all three functions where it may appear. Among these functions, it is most used in F2, which is the most prevalent function among the three in the sample.

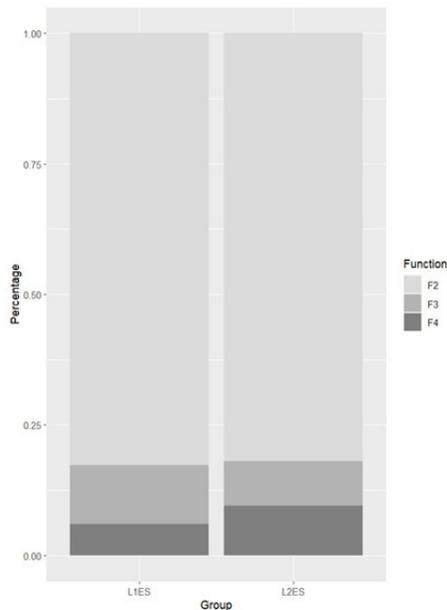


Figure 4. Distribution of *cantaba* in functions F2, F3 and F4.

Furthermore, it is within F2 that *cantaba* assumes its primary and most frequent meaning, specifically when used with commentative processes. The distribution of *cantaba* across the three functions does not show a statistically significant difference between L1 and L2. However, since *cantaba* can also indicate a progressive phase in F2, it is important to analyze the distinction between both uses in F2 to gain a better understanding of the potential differences between the groups. As indicated by a Pearson’s chi-square test, a significant difference is observed between the groups in terms of the distribution of *cantaba* to express commentative processes (70 % for L1, 89 % for L2) versus progressive phases (30 % for L1, 13 % for L2) in F2 ($p < .001$). There is competition between *cantaba* and other forms, such as the progressive periphrasis *estaba cantando* (see 25) and the gerund *cantando* (see 26) to express the progressive phase in F2.

- (25) De repente vio que un panadero **estaba sacando** panes frescos de un carro. (ESL2AVFR013)
 ‘All of a sudden (she) saw that a baker **was taking** fresh loaves of bread out of a van.’
- (26) Empezaron a imaginarse también **viviendo** en una casa así. (ESL2AVFR013)
 ‘They began to imagine **living** in a house like that too.’

Participants use either the simple form *cantaba* or other forms, depending on the context. Specifically, *cantaba* is used by both groups to convey a subjective meaning, that is, when the facts are presented from a character’s perspective, like when there is a projection of what the character sees or witnesses (see example 22).

Figure 5 shows the distribution of *cantaba* and other forms in F2 to express a progressive meaning.

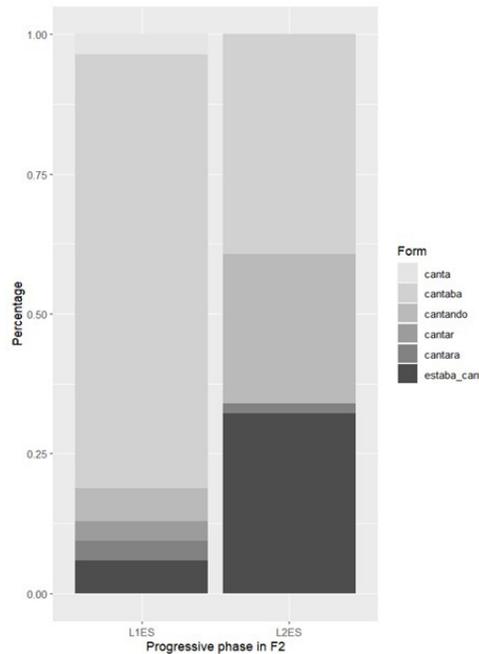


Figure 5. Distribution of tenses to express progressive meaning in F2.

Our findings reveal that L1 participants exhibit a higher preference for *cantaba* (78 %), whereas L2 participants use it less frequently (39 %) and present a wider range of forms. We also found significant differences between L1 and L2 in the distribution of *cantaba* versus *estaba cantando*, as confirmed by a Pearson’s chi-square test ($p < .001$).

In F3, *cantaba* carries a progressive meaning (example 27); however, alternative forms such as *estaba cantando* (example 28) and the gerund *cantando* (example 29) can also be used.

- (27) Mientras el policía **se llevaba** a la muchacha, el hombre entró a un restaurante (L1ES02)
 ‘While the policeman **took** (was taking) the girl, the man entered a restaurant.’
- (28) Le pusieron una esposa en la mano mientras el mismo delincuente **estaba robando** unos cigarros (L2ES03)
 ‘They put a handcuff on his hand while the same lawbreaker **was stealing** some cigars.’
- (29) **Corriendo** con ella, se chocó con Chaplin. (L2ES04)
 ‘**Running** with it, he bumped into Chaplin.’

Once again, we observe that L1 participants display a higher frequency of *cantaba* (85 %) compared to L2 participants (63.6 %), who exhibit a wider range of forms (see Figure 6). Although the differences do not reach statistical significance due to the small sample size, there is a noticeable trend towards significance. It is noteworthy that the L1 group consistently avoids using *estaba cantando* in F3, while L2 participants employ it 19 % of the time.

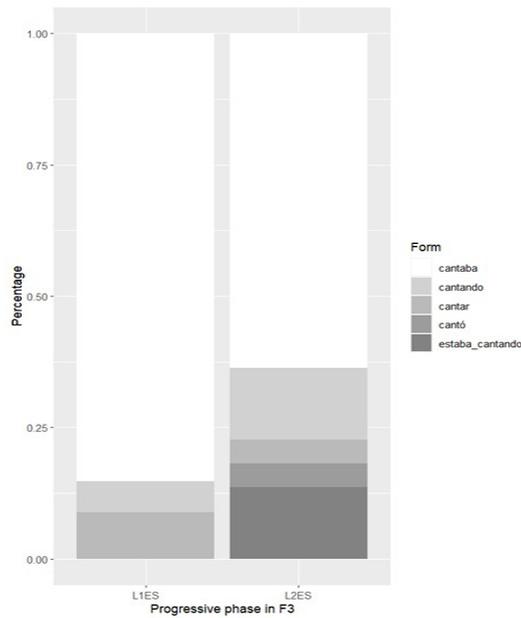


Figure 6. Distribution of tenses to express progressive meaning in F3

Overall, the use of *cantaba* varies depending on the context and the intended meaning. L1 participants tend to use this form more frequently than L2 participants, who show a wider range of forms used to convey similar meanings.

Discussion

The study found that both L1 and L2 Spanish participants were able to use verb forms *cantaba* and *cantó* to convey different meanings in each function where they may appear. However, there were some differences in both the frequency and range of use between the two groups in functions F2 and F3. Both groups used *cantaba* and *cantó* more frequently than other forms in these two functions, but L2 speakers tended to use a wider range of forms than L1 speakers, and L1 speakers used *cantó* and *cantaba* more frequently than L2 speakers. The differences between the groups in terms of usage were statistically significant. Furthermore, while our L2 speakers demonstrate an understanding of polysemy, they tended to favour a specialization strategy, where one form corresponds to one meaning, rather than the option of using one form in different contexts. These results are in line with previous on polysemy acquisition, although we acknowledge that they need to be taken with caution, given the limited amount of data and small overall sample size.

Our results may raise questions about the potential triggers that may be contributing to our L2 speakers' tendency to associate single forms with single meanings, even at advanced levels of proficiency. One possibility we considered is the influence of classroom input. This type of instruction could lead to a more rigid mapping between form and meaning, as opposed to the more fluid and flexible associations that are typical of natural language use. However, in terms of instruction, while L2 learners are exposed to multiple verb forms, common teaching methods often prioritize polysemy by presenting one form with a list of contexts in which it can be used without thoroughly explaining the differences or nuances between all meanings (Llopis-García, Real y Ruiz, 2012).

We also considered that tense distribution in the L2 learners' L1, which is French, could be influencing their choice of Spanish verb forms. However, this explanation does not seem plausible since imperfect tense (*chantait*) is used more frequently in French than in Spanish to express a progressive meaning. Furthermore, even in commentary enunciation contexts, the present tense (*chante*) is employed for progressive processes in French, whereas, in Spanish, the periphrasis *está cantando* is preferred. These distinctions suggest that the higher usage of *estaba cantando* over *cantaba* cannot be directly attributed to the influence of the learners' L1.

Overall, the study highlights the complexity of verb usage in Spanish and the different strategies that may be employed to express different meanings. However, additional research is necessary to explore other possible factors that might contribute to the observed patterns in our data. These factors may extend beyond the anticipated difficulties associated with polysemy typically encountered in second language acquisition studies.

Conclusions

The acquisition of past tense in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), especially in Spanish, has been a challenge identified in previous studies. However, the role of pragmatic factors and the polysemy of tenses have not been extensively studied. To address these gaps, we presented the FMF model and applied it to analyze written narratives produced by L1 and L2 advanced speakers based on a film fragment. Through this analysis, we explored the polysemy of verb tenses and investigated differences between advanced L2 and native speakers with respect to this phenomenon. Our results indicated a difference between the two groups in their approach to verb tense polysemy. Further analysis, including a larger sample size and more data, is necessary to confirm whether these results are representative of the wider population to which our participants belong.

Another interesting avenue for future research based on the FMF model lies in the field of Second Language teaching. Current knowledge on the acquisition of verb tenses in the L2, including the findings of this study, invites researchers and pedagogues to consider whether it is more advantageous to introduce a wide range of verb forms early in instruction or to focus on teaching various functions or usages of verb forms such as *cantaba* and *cantó*. We are currently working on addressing this question (Cruz Enríquez and Alba de la Fuente, 2024).

In conclusion, the FMF model provides a coherent framework for analyzing the complexity of verb usage in Spanish, and it has proven to be valuable for examining differences in tense usage between native speakers and second language learners. Future research can expand upon our findings by applying the FMF model to speakers at different proficiency levels, as well as to other learner populations such as heritage speakers. Additionally, further investigation can explore additional factors that may contribute to the observed patterns in our data, going beyond the expected challenges associated with polysemy in second language acquisition studies. By delving deeper into these factors, we can enhance our understanding of the complexities involved in the acquisition and use of verb forms in Spanish.

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