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# INTERPRETING MOOD CHOICE EFFECTS IN L2 AND L1 SPANISH: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS<sup>1</sup>

José Amenós-Pons<sup>a</sup>, Aoife Ahern<sup>a</sup> and Pedro Guijarro-Fuentes<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Universidad Complutense de Madrid;

<sup>b</sup>Universidad de las Islas Baleares

## Abstract

The rich morphology of Spanish, such as that of tense and verbal mood, encodes a range of features leading to diverse contextual effects on interpretation, some of which are examined in the light of original experimental data in the present study. Specifically, we analyse data on the interpretation of mood in concessive structures by upper-intermediate and advanced learners of L2 Spanish, with L1 French (N=48) and L1 English (N=40), and from an L1 European Spanish control group (N=35). The results of the learner-group interpretation experiment led to a follow-on study enquiring into the understanding of mood alternation in concessive clauses by another group of L1 European Spanish speakers through a metalinguistic interpretation task. Learner group findings suggested a heavier reliance on lexical information and world-knowledge than on grammatical cues, while L1 speakers' data indicate a default association maintained between subjunctive and irrealis interpretations, leading to a greater measure of variability in describing presuppositional uses of this mood. The native speaker data may reflect challenges posed by representing and describing, using metalinguistic knowledge, structures whose interpretation requires the integration of linguistic, discourse and extralinguistic information. Findings are discussed in relation to current linguistic descriptions and potential contributions of our empirical data.

Keywords: English, French, Spanish Subjunctive, L2 acquisition, pragmatic inference.

## 1 Introduction

This article deals with the question of the stability of the interpretation of grammatical features when affected by the semantic and discourse-pragmatic information in the linguistic and extralinguistic environment. Ultimately, our study intends to shed light on the differences and similarities of first and second language (L1 and L2) interpretation processes at the syntax-discourse interface, by comparing data related to the ability of advanced adult L1 French and L1 English learners of L2 Spanish, as well as a native European Spanish group, to interpret effects on sentence meaning of indicative/subjunctive (IND/SUBJ) mood contrasts in concessive clauses. Based on the results obtained in the empirical study, theoretical implications will be explored in relation to mood alternation in the structures analysed.

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As put forth by authors such as Parodi and Tsimpli (2005) and Sorace (2000, 2011), one symptom of incomplete acquisition is variability or optionality, i.e. partial convergence with native speakers in the use and interpretation of specific features in the L2. In the present study we analyse L2 optionality in the interpretation of mood, described at the theoretical level as an interpretable feature, due to its potential contribution to sentence meaning by affecting the interpretation of stance or propositional attitude, and which has been empirically shown to be a source of variability also for L1 Spanish speakers, especially in relation to language contact situations (Gudmestad 2010; Kanwit and Geeson 2014).

Thus, the present study considers, on one hand, variability, or traces of optionality, in native speakers' interpretations and on the other, the possible commonalities and discordances among L1 versus L2 speakers' interpretation processes, focusing on a particular morphosyntactic feature – verbal mood in Spanish – whose interpretation takes place at the syntax-discourse interface. The data are presented as a means for analysing how close L2 Spanish learners' interpretations are to those of L1 speakers in such cases, and in order to strengthen the relationship between theoretical descriptions of mood in Spanish with empirical evidence of these groups of speakers' perceptions of the effects of mood alternation on meaning. In this way, variability is considered from the point of view of pragmatic factors that intervene in utterance interpretation, and in addition, the degree to which such pragmatic factors differ when they take effect in an L2, or in other words, in the light of a specific aspect of the development of pragmatics in Second Language Acquisition (henceforth, SLA).

To this end, we examine some specific instances of how indicative and subjunctive mood in Spanish interact with semantic and pragmatic information in concessive constructions. In particular, our focus is on mood alternation, which takes place in subordinate clauses where the presence of either indicative or subjunctive is grammatical, but leads to certain discourse-pragmatic effects on the interpretation of the utterance. Such is the case in concessive constructions, as in the following example:

(1) *Creo que estoy enamorado, aunque ella me ignora / ignore.*

'I think I'm in love, although she ignores (IND / SUBJ) me'.

The choice of mood here can be said to correspond, roughly, to whether the speaker chooses to assert or foreground the content of the subordinate clause, *she ignores me*, with the indicative; or esle to present it either as a mere possibility, or as background information (as explained below), with the subjunctive. The interpretation of mood does

not depend solely on the type of clause in which the verb form is embedded, but on the combination of syntactic features and extralinguistic information: mood imposes restrictions on the process of accessing contextually available assumptions during inferential processes of utterance interpretation, but does not entirely determine their outcome (Ahern 2006). The grammaticality of both indicative and subjunctive in these kinds of examples constitutes what Papp (2000: 179) classified as *quasi* or *pseudo*-optionality in the grammar, since mood alternation obeys “rules [that] seem optional only on the surface, but have different acceptability value and carry different interpretations depending on the context of utterance.”

A great number of theoretical analyses of the semantic and pragmatic aspects of mood alternation have been developed over time (see, for instance, Quer 2001; Ahern 2004; Fábregas 2014 and references therein), but without considering empirical data. In contrast, studies that have attempted to complement the existing linguistic descriptions of mood with experimental data are less frequent (e.g. Pérez-Leroux 1998; Sánchez-Naranjo and Pérez-Leroux 2010; Borgonovo, Bruhn de Garavito and Prévost 2015). By bringing together the results of some previous empirical studies (Ahern, Amenós-Pons and Guijarro-Fuentes 2014, 2016a, 2016b), this paper will attempt to contribute to (a) the understanding of how mood choice affects utterance interpretation by L1 and L2 Spanish speakers, connecting in this way with studies related to the L2 acquisition of interpretable features, and to the development in L2 of the ability to adequately integrate information at the interfaces between grammar, meaning and context; and (b) putting to test some of the theoretical claims made in the linguistic literature.

The acquisition of indicative / subjunctive mood alternation by learners of L2 Spanish has often been the focus of research on L1 English learners (Iverson, Kempchinsky and Rothman 2008; Collentine 2003, Kanwit and Geeson 2014, to name just a few), but seldom considered in native speakers of languages that are more closely related to Spanish, such as other Romance languages. Also, on the other hand, studies on L2 acquisition tend to concentrate on specific hypotheses and data, without further considering implications for general linguistic assumptions. In the present study, a contribution is also made to describing the process of the acquisition of L2 features that are present in the learners' L1 – albeit with different specifications related to their combinatory properties – as we provide data on the acquisition of Spanish mood by both L1 English and L1 French-speaking learners of Spanish; thus some interesting

comparisons can be drawn, as both these languages present similarities and differences with respect to Spanish.

The paper is organised as follows: firstly, in section 2, an introduction to mood alternation in Spanish concessive clauses is provided, as well as a sketch of similar aspects of the grammar of English and French; next, in section 3, an introduction to the empirical studies on mood interpretation by L1 and L2 Spanish speakers in concessive clauses that we developed is offered, including the corresponding hypotheses and methodology; in section 4, we report on and discuss the results of these studies, finishing up with conclusions, limitations and suggestions for further research in section 5, linking theoretical description and experimental data.

## **2 Mood in concessives: Spanish, English and French**

### **2.1 Mood in Spanish concessive clauses**

The indicative/subjunctive mood contrast in Spanish is found most frequently in subordinate clauses, and within these, it is usually considered to reflect contrasting semantic and syntactic properties of main clause predicates or subordinating conjunctions that select for clausal arguments in one or the other mood (cf. Ahern, Amenós-Pons and Guijarro-Fuentes. 2016). Namely, as pointed out in descriptive grammars (Ridruejo 1999; Pérez Saldanya 1999; RAE 2009) predicates that select for subjunctive can be classed in two main categories: those that express desire, doubt, obligation, need or possibility introduce hypothetical, potential or *irrealis* subjunctive argument clauses; whereas subjunctive is also selected by factive-emotive predicates (v.g. *lamentar*, *alegrar*, *preocupar*: regret, be glad [that], worry) characterised by requiring presupposed argument clauses. Thus, a common denominator of the elements that select for subjunctive in Spanish is their association with subordinate clauses that obtain hypothetical or presuppositional interpretations.

On the other hand, certain predicates and subordinating conjunctions allow either mood in their argument clauses. In the present study, we focus on *although* (*aunque*) concessive clauses, in which, depending on the discourse or extralinguistic context of the utterance, the subordinate adjunct clause in subjunctive can obtain either an *irrealis* or a presuppositional reading, as shown in (2), which would translate into English as either (a)

or (b), depending on whether or not “they pay very well” is interpreted as an assumption that forms part of the common ground<sup>2</sup>:

(2) *Aunque paguen (SUBJ) muy bien, he decidido no aceptar el puesto.*

- a. ‘Although they pay very well, I’ve decided not to accept the post’.
- b. ‘Even if they pay very well, I’ve decided not to accept the post’.

So, for example, if (2) were uttered following an affirmation that the post will be well-paid, (2a) would best reflect what is said. Whereas if the speaker has explained that s/he doesn’t know what salary will be offered, translation (2b) would better reflect the most appropriate interpretation. On the other hand, if the indicative is used<sup>3</sup> in the concessive clause in (2), the proposition expressed in this clause would be understood as an assertion, in terms of the speaker intending the content to be added to the common ground. Therefore, the use of indicative would not be appropriate if the discourse context were such that the propositional content had already been mentioned, or if the speaker intended to mention this content as a mere hypothesis.

This distinction between the two kinds of subjunctive use found in concessive clauses is described by the Real Academia Española (RAE) (2009: §47.6.3a) in terms of *hypothetical* versus *factual* subjunctive concessives; the former being cases in which “a situation is introduced in the present moment, and it is affirmed that its realisation will not prevent another state of affairs”. In the case of subjunctive *factual* concessives, on the other hand, reiterating explanations presented in previous grammatical descriptions (see Veiga and Mousteiro Louzao 2007: 114, and references therein) the RAE explains (2009: §47.6.3c) that this kind of interpretation “[...] is characteristic of contexts in which shared information is brought up in order to question it as a relevant argument in some generalization”. Or also when [...the speaker] “wishes to reject an objectioFán that has been presented or suggested in the previous discourse” (authors’ own translations). In sum, in fragments such as these it can be seen that grammatical descriptions of mood alternation in concessive clauses make reference to pragmatic factors like propositional

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘common ground’ refers loosely here to the set of premises assumed to be shared by the speaker and the addressee, including those from the previous discourse.

<sup>3</sup> As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, the alternation of indicative and subjunctive in concessive clauses is noteworthy in that both moods can be used in any tense (present, preterit imperfect, perfect or pluperfect), in contrast, for instance, with conditional clauses, in which mood alternation is restricted to certain tenses, despite the similarity between conditional and concessive meaning.

attitude, e.g. presenting a situation as hypothetical, and context, both discourse and extralinguistic, e.g. shared information, previous discourse; such references are fundamental elements of the analysis of how mood alternation affects interpretation.

Thus, these kinds of examples of mood alternation show that interpreting mood in concessives requires taking into account semantic, syntactic and pragmatic factors. In the empirical study presented here, we use data on the interpretation of mood by learners of Spanish in order to determine the degree to which second language learners are capable of acquiring grammatical elements that require processing at linguistic interfaces, and the possible progression of this acquisition process as higher levels of general language proficiency are attained. In addition, we hope to contribute experimental data that can test the empirical validity of what has been said so far in linguistic descriptions of concessive clauses such as the aforementioned one provided by the RAE.

In order to provide a clear view of the process of acquiring Spanish by both learner groups, i.e. the L1 French and the L1 English speakers, we will briefly consider verbal mood in the two languages spoken by our participants, as an indication of the starting point for their acquisition process.

## **2.2 English and French-speakers' knowledge of mood**

In English, it is well known that there are no specifically dedicated morphological forms for the subjunctive mood, but instead, in present tense it is distinguishable from the indicative, which is inflected, by the lack of inflection or base-form of the verb, the bare infinitive. In past tense, the subjunctive is only identifiable in uses of *were* in combination with 1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular subjects, since the verb *be* is the only verb in English that has person inflection in the past tense. In concessive clauses in English, the subjunctive is used in less restricted registers, including spoken language, as in *Even if it were Friday we wouldn't be able to go*. However, this is the only case in which an identifiable subjunctive form is found, i.e. when *were* appears with singular subjects as mentioned above. But the indicative *was* can also be used in the same sentential context, and the interpretation of the utterance would not vary based on the choice of mood. For any other verb in English, the subjunctive form is indistinguishable from the past simple indicative (Bergs and Heine 2010).

Overall, uses of the subjunctive in English are limited to certain registers, such as formal legalistic written texts, and have become archaic. The nuances of modal meaning conveyed by subjunctive in Romance or in the restricted contexts mentioned for English

are nowadays generally expressed through the use of English modal verbs (Bergs and Heine 2010: 110-115). Thus, English speaking learners of Spanish can be expected to have a very limited awareness of the role of subjunctive mood based on their L1 knowledge, despite its optional presence in concessive clauses, the only aspect in which English subjunctive may be manifested and could possibly play a role in the construction of an interlanguage grammar by these learners.

On the other hand, French verbs do have morphological mood, and the French subjunctive may achieve the same types of readings as its Spanish counterpart (De Mulder 2010; Rhis 2013). However, unlike in Spanish, in contemporary French the choice of subjunctive tenses is reduced to present and perfect forms: the imperfect and the pluperfect subjunctive are commonly used in Spanish, but not in French. Furthermore, linguistic environments accepting mood alternation are more restricted in French than in Spanish. In French, there are no concessive conjunctions that freely accept mood alternation: mood choice is restricted by the subordinating conjunction being used. Thus, conjunctions like *bien que* or *quoique* are usually followed by subjunctive forms, while *même si* is always followed by indicative forms. Traditional translation rules in contrastive Spanish-French grammars recommend translating *aunque* + *indicative* as *bien que* + *subjunctive*, and *aunque* + *subjunctive* as *même si* + *indicative*, but professional translators do not systematically follow this rule (Ballesterro 2010: 337-356). Thus, there is no direct mapping between Spanish and French in terms of the conditions for mood alternation. When learning Spanish concessive structures, L1 French speakers will have to learn not only which mood is allowed by each conjunction in the target language, but also what type(s) of interpretation each mood obtains.

### **3 Two empirical tests of Spanish mood interpretation**

#### **3.1 Research aims and questions**

*Although*-clauses in Spanish constitute a particularly complex instance of mood alternation, where discourse and real-world knowledge play a major role, and pragmatic enrichment processes may lead to divergent interpretations of the subjunctive form, as shown section 2.1 above. Thus, studying how L1 speakers and L2 learners set to the task of interpreting concessive clauses should shed light not only on how each group manages to integrate syntactic, semantic and pragmatic processing when interpreting utterances, but also on whether natives and non-natives tend to react similarly in developing the integration of information from these diverse sources to identify speaker meaning in such

instances. In addition, data from native speakers could no doubt contribute to what has so far been the theoretical linguistic description of the interpretive effects of mood alternation in Spanish (for example, Ahern 2004; Veiga and Mosteiro Louzao 2006; RAE 2009; Fábregas 2014 and references therein).

More specifically, comparing L1 English and L1 French learners will provide information on how (and if) the two groups succeed in assembling features that are absent in their L1 (for the English group) and/or in reassembling features that they already possess in their L1, although differently assembled (for the L1 French group) (Hwang and Lardiere 2013; Lardiere 2008, 2009). In this connection, the research questions we intend to address here are:

1. Do French and English L2 learners of Spanish differ in their interpretation of native-like and non-native-like uses of mood in Spanish although-concessive constructions?
2. Are there differences between the types of choices made in deciding on the most adequate interpretation by L1 speakers and L2 learners? (i.e., do native speakers systematically rule out interpretive choices that are disallowed by the grammar?)
3. Will language acquisition data from these populations confirm current theoretical linguistic descriptions of mood alternation in concessive clauses, or identify contradictions or a need for further refinement of these descriptions?

Thus, regarding the acquisition of L2 syntax, we consider whether interpretable features that are not present as such in the L1 are acquirable. If evidence can be provided that L1 English learners of Spanish fully develop the ability to interpret mood, it would favour this hypothesis. We will also analyse whether merely reassembling features (as opposed to fully acquiring them) is an advantage in the acquisition of an L2, in terms of final attainment. We tackle these issues by contrasting results obtained by the English L1 group with those of the L1 French group, and by comparing the behaviour these groups with a native control group in interpreting mood in concessive clauses.

In addition, this study also considers syntactic and discourse/pragmatic interface vulnerability (Sorace 2011). Sorace suggests that integrating information from different modules may be a source of residual optionality. Despite the fact that Sorace's Interface Hypothesis was primarily formulated in relation to simultaneous bilingual acquisition and attrition processes, it may have implications for L2 learners. Mood interpretation involves interfaces, as put forth above, and would thus be expected to lead to variability in both

the English and the French L1 groups and also, possibly to a lesser degree, in the L1 Spanish control group.

In sum, the present study may provide evidence of the contrast between L2 learners' approach to processing the utterances, and that of the L1 control group, and also, of how data from native speakers can be seen as evidence in favour of, or against, the aforementioned descriptions of the semantic and pragmatic properties of concessive clause mood alternation.

### 3.2 Task design and hypotheses

The study reported here was based on two different experimental tasks. In the first task (henceforth referred to as *interpretation task*), two groups of L2 Spanish learners, and a control group of L1 European Spanish speakers, were asked to complete a multiple choice questionnaire containing twenty randomised *if*-conditional and ten *although*-concessive items. The *if*-conditional items were used for a separate piece of research which will not be dealt with here.

The task was preceded by an ethno-linguistic questionnaire on the participants' age group (under 30/30-60/ over 60), gender and language background. No strict time limit was set, but participants were advised not to take more than forty minutes to complete the interpretation task, and voluntarily reported the amount of time used to do so. Online and paper versions of the material were used, in accordance with the participants' preference.

The items were based on contextualised utterances adapted from a press corpus (selected from European Spanish sources in the *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual*). Three answer options were given for every item, each paraphrasing a different type of interpretation (irrealis, presuppositional or other / distractor<sup>4</sup>). The items had been tested in a small-scale pilot study with 10 native speakers of European Spanish. An example item is provided below:

(3) (*En un foro de Internet*)

*Creo que estoy enamorado, aunque ella me ignora y no me hace caso. ¿Qué hago?*

*El autor de este mensaje...*

a. *cree que hay una posibilidad de que su amada le ignore ( )*

b. *explica que la amada no le presta atención ( )*

c. *expresa que está muy preocupado ( )*

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<sup>4</sup> The distractors were intended as incorrect, yet plausible ways of interpreting the utterances.

(In an Internet forum)

I think I'm in love, although she ignores me and pays me no attention. What should I do?

The author of this message...

- a. thinks it's possible that the one he loves ignores him ( )
- b. explains that the person he loves pays him no attention ( )
- c. expresses that he is very worried ( )

The interpretation task was carried out by two groups of of adult L1 French (N = 48) and of L1 English (N = 40) learners of Spanish, all learning in a formal, relatively homogenous, non-immersion setting, namely, the Instituto Cervantes, in France or in one of the following countries: the UK, Ireland, the USA or Australia. All the subjects had been independently assessed for language proficiency and placed at CEFR B2 level (L1 French, N = 16 / L1 English, N = 26) or C1/C1+ level (L1 French, N = 32 / L1 English, N = 14). The control group was made up of 35 native European Spanish speakers.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the concessive items in the interpretation task, according to the tense, mood and type of expected interpretation of the concessive clauses.

Table 1: Concessive items (interpretation task)

Items 21 and 22. Aunque + Present Subjunctive (irrealis reading expected)
<i>No podemos tener un perro en casa, aunque Juan me lo pida de rodillas.</i> 'We can't have a dog in the house, even if Juan begs me on his knees'.
Items 24 and 25. Aunque + Present Indicative
<i>Creo que estoy enamorado, aunque ella me ignora.</i> 'I think I'm in love, although she ignores me'.
Items 27 and 28. Aunque + Imperfect Indicative
<i>Iba acumulando deudas, aunque él manifestaba que todo se iba a solucionar.</i> 'He went on accumulating debts, although he claimed there would be a solution for everything'.
Items 23 and 29. Aunque + Perfect Subjunctive (presuppositional reading expected)
<i>Aunque haya nacido en Nueva York, mi hijo tendrá un padrino muy flamenco.</i> 'Although he was born in New York, my son will have a very "flamenco" godfather'.
Items 26 and 30. Aunque + Imperfect Subjunctive (irrealis reading expected)

*La junta electoral ordenó la admisión de todos los candidatos, aunque a algunos les faltara la documentación.*

‘The electoral committee ordered the admittance of all the candidates, although some were missing documents’.

In relation to the performance of the non-native groups, general difficulty was expected in identifying the effects of mood alternation. However, an advantage for L1 French speakers, thanks to similarities between their overall mood system and that of Spanish, was hypothesized: L1 influence was expected in the ability to associate mood with certain interpretative effects in concessives, namely, presuppositional and irrealis (subjunctive) versus assertive (indicative) readings. A smaller degree of variability was expected for the L1 Spanish control group, compared to both L2 learner groups, due to the *quasi*-optionality (see section 1) of the grammar of mood alternation in Spanish concessive clauses.

The second task (henceforth, *metalinguistic task*) consisted of a written, online description questionnaire, administered to a group of 61 monolingual L1 European Spanish-speakers. Like the previous one, this task was preceded by several ethno-linguistic questions. It was administered electronically through an online Internet platform (Adobe FormsCentral), and included a total of 14 items across two versions, so that each version required participants to read 7 items and respond to 3 open questions about each of these items. 32 of the participants completed test 1, while 29 completed the second version, test 2.

The metalinguistic task was designed in order to clarify some of the choices that the members of the control group had made of the interpretation task, after analyzing the results: contrary to our expectations, as discussed below, the variability found in the control group in some cases had been equal to, or even more prevalent than, the variability shown by the L2 speakers. Thus, this new task was made up of items adapted from the previous interpretation task. The participants were asked to compare two different versions of each utterance, varying only in the verbal mood of the clause: the first with indicative and the second with the subjunctive mood. Each item was preceded by the question – translated from Spanish here for convenience – “What are the differences between (a) and (b)?” followed by two versions, (a) and (b), of the item. Next, two further, more specific questions were asked:

- 2) Do (a) and (b) have the same meaning? Explain what each means.
- 3) Briefly describe a situation in which you could use each of the options (a) and (b).

(En un revista cultural se recogen declaraciones de un famoso cantante español) (8)

Desde Estados Unidos, Alejandro Sanz afirmó:

a) "Aunque haya nacido en Nueva York y se llame Dylan, mi hijo tendrá un padrino muy flamenco, Paco de Lucía".

b) "Aunque ha nacido en Nueva York y se llama Dylan, mi hijo tendrá un padrino muy flamenco, Paco de Lucía".

8.1. ¿Cuál es la diferencia entre las frases a) y b)?

8.2. Las frases a) y b), ¿significan lo mismo? Explique qué significa cada una.

8.3. Describa brevemente una situación en la que podría utilizar cada opción (a y b).

Figure 1: An item from the metalinguistic task

As for the previous task, there was no strict time limit, although it was recommended to spend no more than 30 minutes. The responses given were later classified into types of interpretations of mood alternation in concessive clauses. Thus, the methodology in the second task is partially qualitative, since the results were firstly ascribed to a set of categories and, afterwards, quantified within each category.

Our hypotheses in relation to this second task included the possibility that L1 Spanish speakers could verbalise their perception of how mood alternation affects what is communicated implicitly. This is addressed by analysing our participants' introspections of the effects of mood alternation in a given set of utterances, in order to compile evidence of L1 speakers' metalinguistic awareness of the semantics of mood. In addition, they should shed light on factors underlying variability in mood interpretation, namely, Spanish-speakers' mental representations of the grammar of mood.

## 4 Results and findings

### 4.1 Interpretation task

Group and individual results in the interpretation task were analyzed for each L1 and proficiency level, and item results were considered separately, then arranged into groups based on shared tense-mood combinations and clause types (see Table 1 above). The mean and standard deviation for each L1 group were obtained and compared, and T-tests (L1 French and L1 English), contingency tests, chi-square tests and one-way ANOVAs between groups (L1 French, L1 English and Control) performed. Figure 2 shows the results by item and L1. Only the most relevant group results will be displayed and discussed for the purposes of the present paper.

The degree of success in the task did not correlate with overall proficiency level: in the L1 English group, within the set of learners that achieved the best results, only 43% belonged to the C1/C1+ proficiency group; in the L1 French group, only 37% of the higher scores belonged to the C1/C1+ group<sup>5</sup>. This is why we have chosen to represent the learners of each L1 group as a single entity in Figure 2.

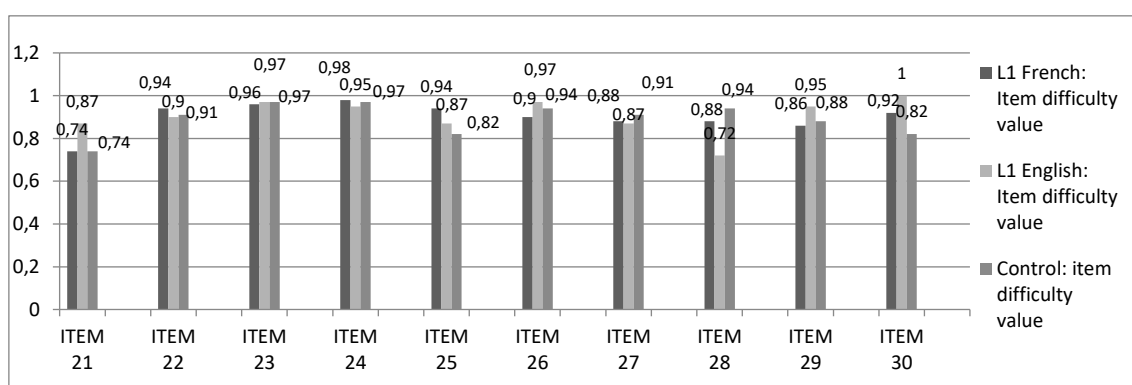


Figure 2: Results by item and L1

As shown in Figure 2, only in item 28 (in the Pearson chi-square test,  $p= 0.023$ ,  $N= 125$ ) is the difference between the three groups significant, where the L1 French group and the control group clearly outperform the L1 English group. However, this is an isolated case: it cannot be said, overall, that one group significantly outperforms the other. Therefore, no systematic difference among the L2 learners was found in relation to L1. Neither does the control group outperform the L2 groups. In fact, the opposite is true for items 21, 25 and 30, showing a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $N= 125$ ) between the relatively low performances of the control group and those of the L2 group having obtained the best results (L1 English for items 21 and 30, L1 French for item 25).

<sup>5</sup> This classification, following Classical Test Theory (Allen and Yen 2002), was developed by ordering all of the participants from those obtaining highest to lowest scores, dividing them into 3 equally-sized groups and using the upper third as “higher success group”, and the lower third as “lower success group” for each of the L1 groups.

Thus, it can be observed that variability – i.e. here, the choice of an unexpected interpretation option – is found in all groups, including the native control group. But comparing the answer options chosen by the L2 learners, on the one hand, and by the L1 speakers, on the other, suggests that they do not always follow the same patterns. We will only compare those items where the difference between natives and non-natives is more significant, i.e., items 21 (in the chi-square test,  $p = 0.013$ ,  $N = 125$ ) and 25 ( $p = 0.066$ ). Item 21, where the controls are outperformed by the learners, reads as follows:

(4) (*Conversación entre una madre y sus hijos que quieren una mascota*)

*Niños: “Juan necesita que le cojamos un cachorrito, los tiene para regalar ya...”*

*Madre: “No podemos tener un perro en casa, aunque Juan me lo pida de rodillas.”*

*Por la respuesta de la madre, entendemos que...*

- a. Juan está pidiéndolo de rodillas*
- b. no tiene importancia si Juan lo pide o no lo pide*
- c. realmente Juan lo va a pedir*

(Conversation between a mother and their children about a pet they want)

Children: “Juan needs us to take a little puppy, he has them ready to give away now...”

Mother: “We can’t have a dog in the house, even if Juan begs me on his knees.”

According to the mother...

- a. Juan is begging on his knees right now
- b. it does not matter whether Juan begs on his knees or not
- c. Juan is actually going to beg on his knees

In item 21 (reproduced here as [4]), the expected answer was (b), which is an irrealis reading of the subjunctive, since the brief context provided does not include any indication that the situation described in the concessive clause proposition is expressed as given information. Distractor choices in the L1 English group (10% of the total amount on answers) evenly distributed between options a) (5%) and c) (5%); in the L1 French group, there was a very slight preference for option c) (16% of the total amount of answers), although some learners (12%) also chose a). In contrast, within the control group, c) was the option chosen by 24%, while a) was unanimously rejected. Interestingly, unlike the L2 learners, the natives hesitated only between options b) and c), whereas they

unanimously rejected option a), describing an interpretation that cannot be reconciled with the semantic properties of a subjunctive form.

Actually, in item 21, the subjunctive could have either presuppositional or irrealis interpretations, depending on the contextual assumptions taken into account, but only the latter was clearly included in the answer options (option b). One of the distractors (option a) refers to something expressed as real at speech time; this is not consistent with the use of the subjunctive. The other option (option c), represents an event that is not real at speech time, although it will take place in the future. The plausibility of this distractor as an acceptable interpretation, by developing an inference from possible to potential future, may have influenced the choices of the native speakers.<sup>6</sup> Still, unlike the L2 learners, no native speaker chose option (a), which paraphrases the clause as referring to something actually taking place at speech time.

The difference in three groups' choices approaches significance ( $p = 0.066$ ) as well in item 25 (seen as item sample [3] above, in Section 3.2), where an assertive reading, linked to the present indicative, was expected, as provided in option b). However, taken as a whole, the utterance might indirectly convey an indication of the speaker's emotional state (i.e., upset by the loved one's indifference), regardless of the mood being used. This inferred conclusion about the speaker's overall intention (possibly identified in option c) probably influenced the control group's answers: 17% of its members chose c), compared to 5% in the L1 English group and 2% in the French group.

Thus, the type of variability found confirms that interface issues – in particular, pragmatic processes that lead to considering different possible implications of speaker meaning – affect interpretation in these items. Still, the fact that the non-natives outperform the natives in some items requires an explanation. We hypothesize that this is due to natives taking into account more inferential conclusions about the intentions behind each utterance than non-natives. Contrastingly, the non-native participants tend to choose those interpretations whose wording closely follows metalinguistic explanations often found in L2 textbooks, rather than developing contextual inferences in an autonomous way.

Overall, the answers given by the control group in the interpretation task, shown in Figure 4, indicate that variability among the L1 Spanish speakers was related to context choice: the distractors chosen by the native informants corresponded to interpretations

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<sup>6</sup> This particular item was exceptional in terms of the rate of native speaker acceptance of what was intended to function as a distractor.

that despite being less salient, as seen by many participants, were nevertheless possible if specific contextual hypotheses were retrieved.

The metalinguistic task described in the next section was designed in order to enquire into the type of hypotheses that native speakers take into account in the interpretation of these items.

#### 4.2 Metalinguistic task

Ten concessive items and four conditional ones (used as distractor items) were randomly distributed into two separate versions of the metalinguistic task (Test 1 and Test 2), in order to shorten test-taking time and avoid potential inaccuracy due to monotony or fatigue. Each version was completed by a different group of native informants with similar backgrounds in terms of age, education, and region of residence. For analytical purposes, the informants' linguistic descriptions and explanations were classified into three macro-categories: presuppositional, irrealis and other. The responses given within each category were quantified and analysed with Wilcoxon and chi-square tests, the results of which are summarized in Figures 3 and 4 below.

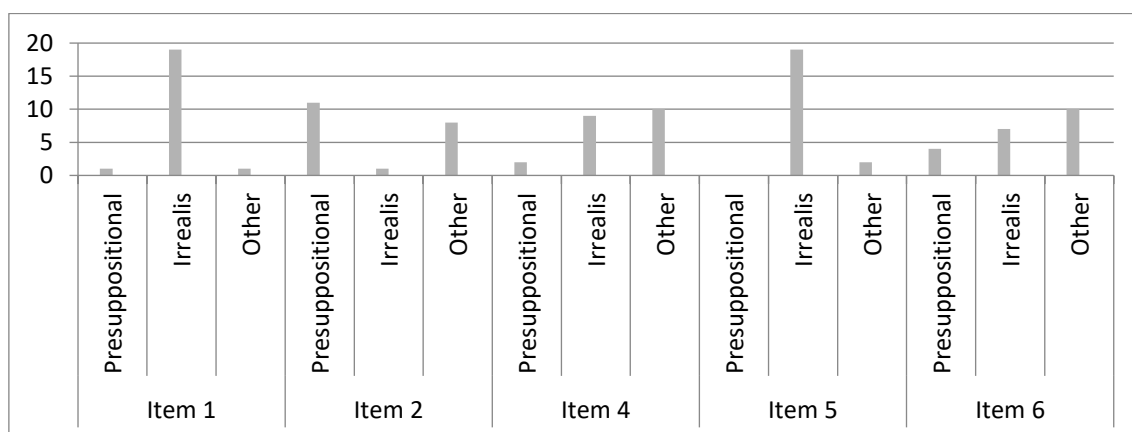
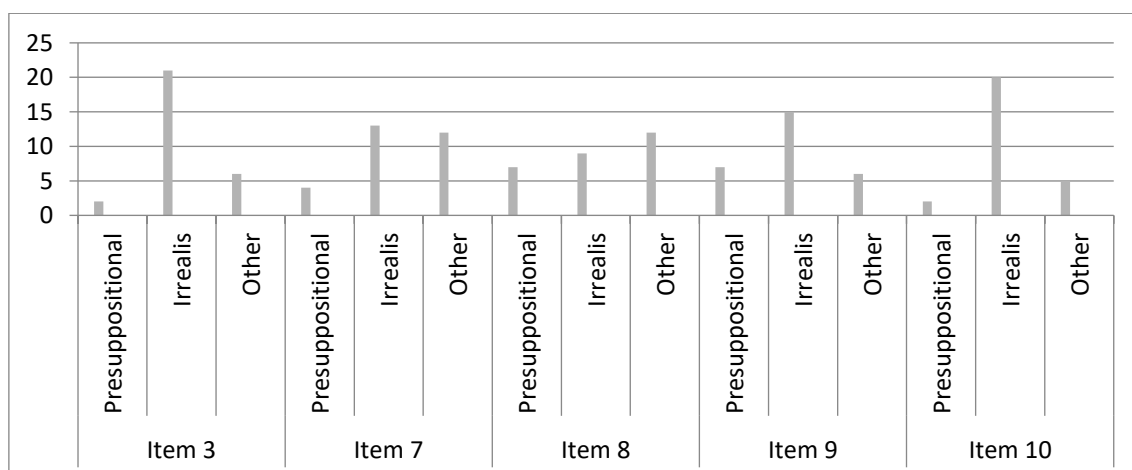


Figure 3: Test 1 (quantified answers)



#### Figure 4: Test 2 (quantified answers)

For items 1, 4, 5 and 10, irrealis explanations were expected; for the remaining items, presuppositional interpretations were foreseen. Figures 3 and 4 clearly show that most native speakers succeeded in identifying and describing irrealis readings of the subjunctive<sup>7</sup>. Conversely, a considerable number of native informants systematically failed to describe presuppositional uses of the subjunctive. The distribution of the answers for every item was statistically significant (in the chi-square test,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $N = 123-125$ ).

Thus, L1 speakers tend to converge on the notion of irrealis (often verbalised as hypothesis, possibility or irrealis). When this is contextually inappropriate, the variability of interpretations increases significantly. At the same time, the notion of presupposition is almost never verbalised as such: instead, L1 speakers mentioned, for instance, that “the information is less important”, or that it pertains to “general knowledge”, which are, indeed, possible implications derivable from semantic presupposition.

The relatively high percentage of interpretations that do not fit into the irrealis or the presuppositional categories (30% in test 1, 29% in test 2) suggests that not all L1 speakers managed to clearly explain the effect of mood alternation, or at least in the same way it is described in the literature<sup>8</sup>.

Nevertheless, we would not consider these results to indicate that the native speakers have failed to acquire and set the features that match mood alternation in Spanish. What the findings from this task do suggest is (a) that the metalinguistic descriptions of L1 speakers do not necessarily reflect their actual linguistic competence and (b) that the process of interpreting mood is not just related to the language faculty, as it involves syntax, semantics, discourse and real-world knowledge. In this sense we have described it throughout the present study as an interface phenomenon, and thereby, linked to variability or optionality in fully competent native speakers.

In fact, while there is a great deal of divergence in the descriptions, grammatical judgments are stable, since the utterances (with the exception of the indicative use in item 4) were rightly considered grammatical by almost all participants. Therefore, inaccuracies

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<sup>7</sup> Item 4 (reproduce the item here) is the only irrealis case where a significant number of informants did not give the anticipated answer. This seems related to the fact that the indicative was not consistent with certain words the item included (quantifiers like *cualquier otro*, ‘any other’, are usual subjunctive triggers); eight informants pointed out that only the subjunctive was appropriate; six informants chose not to answer.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to keep in mind, also, that the identification of presuppositional, also known as ‘factual’ or ‘polemic’, uses of the subjunctive have been ill-described or even ignored in many grammatical descriptions of Spanish, as shown in Veiga and Mosteiro Louzao (2007: 114-124).

in producing a metalinguistic description of an interpretation do not necessarily involve difficulty in conceptualising that interpretation of the utterance. For L1 speakers, grammatical knowledge is effective, but unconscious; while metalinguistic knowledge is necessarily conscious and, generally, much more tentative. Thus, the ability to use and adequately interpret the subjunctive may be completely separate from the kind of metalinguistic capacity tapped into with the task presented here.

Additionally, these results corroborate the idea that natives can access diverse contextual hypotheses when interpreting subjunctive concessive clauses, in accordance with the description provided by the RAE (2009; see section 2.1 above), and understand these uses of the subjunctive in terms of marking the proposition as either *hypothetical* or *factual* by virtue of their assumptions about the utterance context. In other words, these results reinforce the impression derived from the control group's responses to the previous interpretation task, i.e. that the variability shown in the responses of the L1 Spanish speakers is primarily related to the diverging paths to the pragmatic enrichment required to interpret the items which our informants followed. Beyond the remit of the present paper, these results hark back to the call to consider the need to study L2 competence in its own right (Cook 1999), that is, without blindly accepting that native speakers' judgements will always be an adequate benchmark for knowledge of a particular grammatical feature in their language. In this sense, in SLA experiments what will be important is to demonstrate that L2 (or Ln) learners are aware of some, but not all, distinctions, rather than evaluating whether these users' performance is in consonance with that of native speakers. In the next section, we will draw some general conclusions and provide some food for thought in trying to answer our research questions.

## **5 General discussion and conclusions**

In this paper, we intended to discuss how empirical evidence related to the interpretation of concessive clauses in Spanish, by both native and non-native speakers, can offer insight into (a) the processes of the acquisition of interpretable features in an L2, and (b) into the accuracy and adequacy of theoretical descriptions of mood alternation in Spanish concessive clauses. In Section 3.1, three research questions were introduced, which we now return to in order to draw some conclusions.

Firstly, our study set out to determine whether a distinction would be found between English and French L1 speakers in their interpretation of native-like and non-native-like uses of mood in Spanish although-concessive constructions. The data presented suggests

that the acquisition processes followed by both groups is similar. In this sense, the hypothetical advantage of the L1 French speakers – in comparison to the L1 English speakers – in interpreting mood in Spanish, due to starting out with what may be considered closer parametric settings across the L1 and L2, was not shown in our data. This fact seems to favour (among other theoretical stances) a feature-reassembly view of SLA (Hwang and Lardiere 2013; Lardiere 2009), since the presence of this particular feature in French is not shown to lead to any clear advantages. Thus, in this connection, our data is consistent with Lardiere's view that reassembly takes place in order for the learner to fully acquire a feature in the L2. More importantly, the results of the present study seem to highlight some evidence of intra-typological or micro-parametric differences, even between languages that are genetically very close. These differences could constitute an obstacle for L1 French speakers in the acquisition of grammatical features in L2 Spanish, despite having another Romance language as their starting point, contrary to expectations that typological proximity among languages would accelerate the L2 acquisition process.

In the second research question brought up in this paper, possible differences between L1 and L2 speakers in identifying the most adequate interpretation of concessive clauses in connection to mood alternation were sought, and we intended to clarify whether L1 speakers systematically distinguish grammatical options from ungrammatical ones. In this regard, a main factor that distinguished the responses of native and non-native speakers was that optionality was broader in the L2 groups. That is, L2 learners chose, in some cases, interpretations that were not at all compatible with the mood that appeared in a given concessive clause. By contrast, L1 Spanish speakers chose responses consistent with the mood, but on occasions, unexpected in relation to the discourse context provided in the interpretation task items. For this reason, the further insights provided by the metalinguistic task were needed to make sense of the initial findings: with the descriptions elicited in this task, it was shown that explaining *factual*, or presuppositional, readings of subjunctive concessive clauses posed a challenge to L1 Spanish speakers. Nonetheless, these speakers did differentiate their behaviour from that of the L2 groups by systematically rejecting interpretations that were inconsistent with the semantic properties of mood, while the latter groups did not manage this so well as the L1 speakers, in line with our hypotheses. Thus, the L1 speakers showed *quasi*-optionality, whereas our findings show that the L2 learners had not fully acquired the mechanisms by which

discourse and extralinguistic contextual information provide the boundaries of grammaticality in these cases of mood alternation.

A third research question brought up in our study was whether data would be found to confirm, or identify any kind of inadequacies in, standard grammatical descriptions of mood alternation in concessives. In the metalinguistic task, it was found that L1 speakers seldom verbalised interpretations related to presuppositional uses of the subjunctive, tending to formulate descriptions more directly related to irrealis modality. We have tentatively assumed this tendency does not reflect an actual obstacle in recognising such interpretations, but rather simply shows that their description requires greater development of metalinguistic awareness, much in line with hypotheses on SLA such as those of Truscott and Sharwood Smith (2014), which uphold that metalinguistic knowledge is completely independent from that of grammar, encapsulated in the modular systems.

However, this particular assumption related to the difference in the degree of complexity of describing the two kinds of readings obtained from the subjunctive should be addressed in future research. In the meantime, what our data highlights is the fundamental role of inferential processes, in addition to linguistic competence, in interpreting language forms. Context building will influence the choices of the L1 speakers in identifying speaker meaning; therefore, the stability of their choices cannot be taken for granted. Thus, for the purposes of empirical research, there is no such thing as an ideal native speaker, even if it is assumed that L1 speakers have fully developed the grammar of their native language. Researchers intending to compare data of L1 and L2 speakers should always be aware of the underdetermined nature of linguistic meaning and of the composite nature of its interpretation. Therefore, a purely syntactic approach cannot account for the way in which native speakers interpret and use mood; in order to provide a coherent analysis of the effects of mood alternation, an inferential approach to linguistic communication is required.

Further tests involving more learner groups of different L1 and L2 backgrounds and different tasks are very much needed to determine the validity of some of our conclusions. Nevertheless, it is hoped that findings in our study may have some implications for language acquisition theorizing in general and for future research in concessive structures in particular.

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