Zuzana Toth, *Tense and Aspect in Italian Interlanguage*[1]

Anna Raimo
University of Bologna
anna.raimo2@unibo.it

> "A person who doesn't know foreign languages doesn't know anything about his native tongue".[2]

Why is it useful to learn a third language today? What properties does it provide to speakers? Studying a third language allows you to enrich your linguistic vocabulary, read new books, learn about new cultures, improve your memory, increase your ability to communicate, become open and tolerant of others, find a rewarding job, increase your self-confidence, and grow, thanks to an educational activity.

Given these answers, the object of Zuzana Toth's[3] innovative study becomes immediately clear: Italian as a third language (L3). Two questions immediately arise: how will speakers express themselves in the new language and above all, how will they express temporal relations?

In *Tense and Aspect in Italian Interlanguage*, the author investigates the development of tense and aspect marking in interlanguage, analysing narrative texts written by Italian language students at the University of Vienna (Austria). The selected students come from graduate courses and the Institute for Romance Languages in Vienna.

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[1]Berlin & Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020, 278 pp.

[2] Quote attributed to Johann W. Goethe: "Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiß nichts von seiner eigenen" (my translation).

[3] Zuzana Toth is a researcher and teaches Romance languages and literatures at the University of Bratislava. She graduated in Linguistics at the University of Padua with a thesis entitled *La grammatica nelle prove INVALSI* [*Grammar in the INVALSI tests*] with Professor Maria Giuseppa Lo Duca, and is currently working on spelling competence in the above-mentioned tests.

The book is part of the series "Sprachen im Kontext – Language in context", which brings together contributions in the field of applied linguistics, in which the language of use is critically analysed in its context, and as a contextualising factor, of social and political processes and discourses. It consists of ten chapters and is accompanied by an analytical index from which information can be extracted quickly (e.g., Aktionsart 43, 45, 63).

Toth's study focuses particularly on how the process of acquiring verbal aspect is shaped in the interlanguage of L3 learners by factors such as lexical aspect and discourse. In the introduction, the academic gives a brief excursus on the purpose of the book, the learners analysed and presents the structure by summarising the main points. Later on, the researcher first explains the importance of temporal expressions and then shows a practical example of the problem:

Alla fine è arrivato il cacciaguida e uccideva il lupo[4] (Toth 2020: 1)

In this sentence, the reader has difficulty with interpretation of temporal information because it is not clear how the student understands the verb "killed" (*uccideva*). In fact, in its place it would have been appropriate to use the "passato prossimo" with "ha ucciso" or the "passato remoto" with "uccise", a perfective verb which implies that the action took place after the arrival of the guide-hunter and that the action is also concluded and, in the tale, irreversible.

As opposed to English where the two tenses "passato prossimo" and "imperfetto" do not exist, in the Italian language they have two different roles to express time. In fact, to say "Maria ha mangiato la mela" or "Maria mangiava la mela" in English, we would translate the sentences in the same way: 'Maria ate the apple'. But how can we determine if the action is presented as concluded or in progress? In Italian grammars, verbal aspect is defined as the way in which the unfolding of an event is enunciated (Salvi & Vanelli 2004: 190) and this way can be expressed through perfective and imperfective verbs. Therefore, we will speak of perfective aspect when the action is presented as concluded, while we will use imperfective aspect when the action is presented during its unfolding (Renzi & Salvi 1991: 25).

Returning to the example of the sentence; since the student was on beginner-intermediate level, he probably did not yet know the aspectual value of forms

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[4] Translated by Zuzana Toth: "In the end, the hunter arrived and killed the wolf" (Toth 2020: 1).

in Italian and therefore did not understand the difference between perfective and imperfective verbs.

The present study examines the development of the appearance and chosen time marking of students learning Italian in Vienna based on analyses of narrative texts composed by them. Most of the participants have German as their mother tongue and, in addition, speak or are already familiar with other languages, including Romance languages such as Spanish and French. As a first step, the study identifies the level of knowledge since the students' use of perfective and imperfective verb forms in sentences represents the foreground and background of the narrative.

In the second chapter of the book, the scholar examines the key concepts for research on language acquisition, making a distinction between cognitive orientation and sociocultural approaches. The following chapter offers a theoretical introduction to the language phenomenon examined in this study. Toth also describes an excursus on how time and aspects act in the Italian language. In particular, she proposes a reflection on the aspectual distinctions in Italian and other European languages, which are visible at morphological, lexical, and textual level.

The following chapters (the third and the fourth) are devoted to a review of empirical studies on the acquisition of time and appearance in Romance and European languages in general and in the fifth chapter specifically on the Italian language. The main findings identified in a wide range of studies are highlighted. In fact, as already noted, while many researchers claim that lexical aspect and/or discourse degrees influence morphological choice in their interlanguage, there is little evidence of how the effect of these factors changes in the acquisition process. The major issues presented in the sixth chapter allow for the identifications of learners' levels of knowledge, which can be observed in the acquisition of time-aspect in L3 Italian, and the extension on how the development of this time-aspect is influenced by discourse principles and value. Furthermore, it describes the methodological approaches used for data collection and analysis.

It is followed by three further chapters presenting the results of the study conducted using analytical techniques such as *coding of clauses for grounding* and *obligatory occasional analysis*, designed to identify levels of knowledge.

It is precisely on chapter seven that we should dwell, for after the scholar has outlined the field of study, from chapter seven the author enters the full scope of the empirical research. Students with low proficiency use perfective and

imperfective verb forms to a greater extent, regardless of whether the utterance is in the foreground or background of the story:

> C'era una volta la mamma di Cappuccetto Rosso mandava lei per portare una cesta colmato con alimenti alla sua nonna. Nel bosco Cappuccetto Rosso incontrava un lupo. Loro dialogavano e [...].[5] (Toth 2020: 153)

In contrast, students with intermediate knowledge also integrate aspect marking into their language and show a tendency to use the perfective tense, especially with telic predicates in the foreground and the imperfective tense in the background of the stories they write:

> Il lupo ha mangiato anche la piccola ragazza[6] (Toth 2020: 158)

> C'era una volta una piccola ragazza si vestiva sempre un cappotto rosso[7] (*idem.*)

This tendency becomes very pronounced in the advanced-intermediate group, where the association between perfectivity, telicity and foregrounding becomes even more pronounced, while in the background stative predicates conjugated in the imperfect often appear:

> Ho iniziato a parlare del mio tema personale e i professori mi hanno fatto qualche domanda.[8] (Toth 2020: 162)

> Dopo questa parte dell'esame ogni professore mi ha fatto domande della sua materia.[9] (*idem.*)

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[5] My translation: "Once upon a time Little Red Riding Hood's mother sent her to bring a basket filled with food to her grandmother. In the woods Little Red Riding Hood met a wolf. They talked and [...]".

[6] My translation: "The wolf also ate the little girl".

[7] My translation: "Once upon a time a little girl always wore a red coat".

[8] My translation: "I started talking about my personal topic and the professors asked me a few questions".

[9] My translation: "After this part of the exam each professor asked me questions from their subject".

So-called prototypical associations, e.g., the prevalence of telic predicates with perfective predicates in the foreground and stative predicates with imperfective predicates in the background, seem to be categorical in a group with a very advanced level of knowledge:

Il lupo ha anche mangiato la ragazza ed è andato di nuovo al letto[10] (Toth 2020: 165)

C'era una piccola ragazza che aveva una nonna malata[11] (*idem.*)

This analysis is also confirmed in the eighth chapter in which the author investigates narrative texts using the technique of frequency analysis proposed by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005). The indicators chosen from Ellis and Barkhuizen's (2005: 139) study include the length of the text (e.g., the number of words and the number of sentences): the percentage of sentences without errors, the number of errors per 100 words and the percentage of correct use of verbal morphology.

The ninth chapter shows how the frequency of prototypical associations increases in direct proportion to linguistic competence. Toth reports predicate codes for lexical aspect that have been developed to examine the relationship between the marking of morphological aspect, lexical aspects, and the distribution of verb forms in the various discourse levels.

Finally, in the tenth chapter there is a discussion of the main results found with an active comparison with the first five theoretical chapters of the book. There are several factors to be considered, but the influence of the L2 should be further investigated and, above all, a greater number of students from other institutions should be involved so that they can be compared using the same tasks.

Zuzana Toth, in the wake of acquisition studies to understand the evolution of aspectual distinctions in the interlanguage of learners of Romance languages (Andersen 1991; Giacalone Ramat 1995, 2002, 2003; Rocca 2005; Salaberry 2003): has managed to add value to the research by opening a new perspective of work which, if extended, will allow for the improvement of the use of temporal expressions. Temporal expression is not only a fertile field of study for Toth's analyses of interlanguage, but it is also an exemplary object of study in L2 Didactics, as a fundamental feature of all human communication: "[t]he ability

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[10] My translation: "The wolf also ate the girl and went back to bed".

[11] My translation: "There was a little girl who had a sick grandmother".

to talk about time is a fundamental trait of human communication, and all languages we know of have developed means to express time" (Klein 2009: 35).

From a more general point of view, this book represents a crucial stage in Zuzana Toth's scientific production and teaching activities, which have the merit of promoting and supporting the Italian language abroad at a time when it is suffering the blows of growing disinterest. The implications of this book are therefore particularly promising as a foundation for the creation of new bridges of communication and new projects towards plurilingualism. It is now universally known that it is not enough to know only one language. Paraphrasing the words of Frank Smith, it's good to remember that one language can open a corridor for a life, but two languages can open all the doors along the way.[12]

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[12] Quote attributed to Frank Smith: cfr "One language sets you on a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way" (my translation).

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