

Spanish heritage speakers in the Netherlands: word order alternation at the internal and the external interface

This study investigates Spanish heritage speakers' knowledge of subject verb word order, a phenomenon constrained by both semantics and information structure. The first constraint relates to predicate type. According to traditional grammar, in broad focus, subjects precede unergative predicates but follow unaccusative predicates (Suñer, 1982).

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| (1) | UNERGATIVE | <i>¿Qué pasó? Juan gritó.</i>
What happened? John screamed |
| (2) | UNACCUSATIVE | <i>¿Qué pasó? Llegó Juan.</i>
What happened? Arrived John |

Since unaccusativity is linked to both syntactic and semantic features, this constraint on word order lies at the interface between syntax and semantics. The second constraint on subject verb word order is related to focus (Zubizarreta, 1998). In narrow focus, the subject is placed after the verb, regardless of predicate type:

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| (3) | UNERGATIVE | <i>¿Quién gritó? Gritó Juan.</i>
Who screamed? Screamed John |
| (4) | UNACCUSATIVE | <i>¿Quién llegó? Llegó Juan.</i>
Who arrived? arrived John |

Since focus is related to information structure, this constraint pertains to the interface between syntax and discourse/pragmatics.

The Interface Hypothesis (Sorace & Serratrice, 2009) distinguishes between internal interfaces, which integrate information from two linguistic modules such as syntax and semantics, and external interfaces, which connect syntax to domains located outside of formal grammar, like discourse. The external interfaces are argued to be more vulnerable for bilinguals than the internal interfaces. With respect to subject placement, the focus constraint, located at the external interface between syntax and discourse, is therefore expected to provoke more difficulties for heritage speakers than the predicate type constraint, which is located at the internal interface between syntax and semantics. Whereas some previous studies have provided evidence for the vulnerability of various interface phenomena in heritage speakers (e.g. Keating et al., 2011), others have failed to do so (Cuza, 2012).

An acceptability judgment task was administered to 18 monolingual Spanish speakers and 17 heritage speakers of Spanish from the Netherlands with advanced proficiency. The task contained 24 short stories ending with either the question “*¿Qué pasó?*” (“What happened?”, introducing broad focus) or “*¿Quién + verb?*” (“Who V-ed?”, introducing narrow focus). Two sentences followed each story: one with a preverbal subject and one with a postverbal subject. Both sentences had to be rated on a scale from -2 to 2. Half of the verbs in the sentences were unaccusatives and the other half unergatives. Higher ratings for postverbal subjects were expected for both verb types in narrow focus as well as for unaccusative verbs in broad focus. Preverbal subjects were expected to be preferred for unergative verbs in broad focus.

The results, depicted in figure 1, show that the monolingual control group does not behave completely in line with the above described predictions: they do not prefer postverbal subjects for unaccusative predicates in broad focus. However, they do rate them relatively higher with unaccusative verbs than with unergative verbs in broad focus, which confirms that native speakers treat both verb types differently.

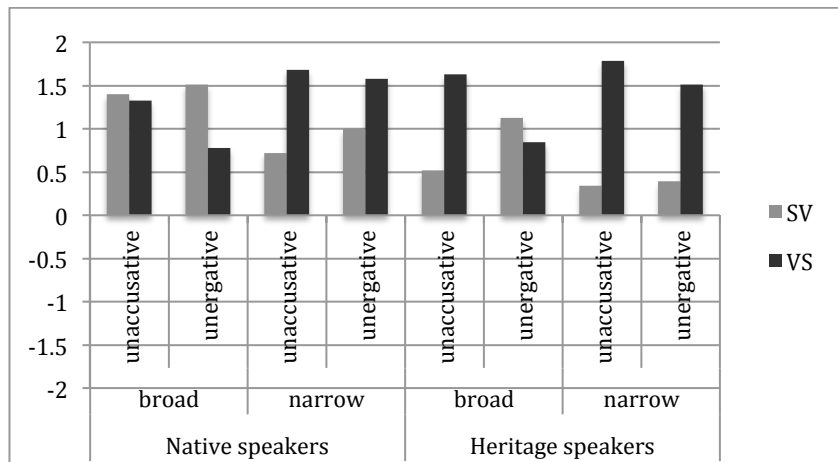


Figure1: Native and heritage speaker's mean ratings on SV and VS orders in all conditions

In the narrow focus condition, heritage speakers prefer postverbal subjects across verb types ($t = -8.41$, $p = 7.63 \cdot 10^{-8}$ for unaccusatives and $t = -4.90$, $p = 3.62 \cdot 10^{-5}$ for unergatives), just as monolingual speakers do ($t = -4.25$, $p = 0.0003$ for unaccusatives and $t = -3.18$, $p = 0.004$ for unergatives). Heritage speakers thus show native-like knowledge regarding the focus constraint.

In the broad focus condition on the other hand, heritage speakers diverge from the monolingual pattern with both verb types. With unaccusative verbs, they prefer preverbal subjects ($t = -6.56$, $p = 2.21 \cdot 10^{-7}$), unlike native speakers, who do not make a distinction. With unergative verbs, heritage speakers do not show a significant preference, while native speakers prefer preverbal subjects ($t = 3.12$, $p = 0.004$).

The fact that heritage speakers diverge from the native pattern only in broad focus with both unaccusative and unergative verbs, indicates that the semantic constraint of predicate type is more problematic for them than the discourse constraint of information structure. This result thus contradicts the Interface Hypothesis, but confirms earlier work on word order in heritage speakers (de Prada-Pérez & Pascual y Cabo, 2012). Nevertheless, the heritage speakers rate preverbal subjects relatively higher for unergative verbs compared to unaccusative verbs in broad focus, implying that they do distinguish between the two verb types. We will discuss these findings in relation to other possible accounts such as feature stability and frequency.

References

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