

# The status of interrogative subject–verb inversion in Spanish-English bilingual children



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## Abstract

The present cross-sectional study examines the status of interrogative subject–verb inversion in Spanish among twenty-seven ( $n = 27$ ) Spanish-English bilingual children born and raised in the United States. Results from an oral elicited production task show significant low levels of target inversion in both matrix and embedded *wh*-questions, compared with monolingual children. Lack of inversion was more significant with embedded questions, and among the youngest children. It is argued that the differences observed stem from syntactic transfer from English, language dominance and the complexity of the structure. This leads to a process of syntactic optionality in child heritage Spanish similar to what is found in Caribbean varieties of Spanish.

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## 1. Introduction

Simultaneous bilingual children exposed to two languages from an early age develop functionally differentiated grammatical systems with little interdependence between the two languages (De Houwer, 1990; Genesee, 1989; Genesee et al., 1995; Meisel, 1994; Paradis and Genesee, 1996). This process, although independent, is not exempt from cross-language interaction, which plays either a negative or positive role in the development of a myriad of morphosyntactic features (Döpke, 1998; Müller and Hulk, 2001; Pirvulescu et al., 2014; Silva-Corvalán, 2014; Strik and Pérez-Leroux, 2011; Yip and Matthews, 2000, 2009). In the specific case of Spanish-English bilingual children born and raised in the United States (U.S.), previous research documents significant asymmetries *vis à vis* the monolingual norm in the production and interpretation of morphosyntactic structures such as clitic placement (Pérez-Leroux et al., 2011), differential object marking (Montrul and Sánchez-Walker, 2013), gender concord and assignment (Cuza and Pérez-Tattam, 2016; Montrul and Potowski, 2007) or in the development of tense, aspect and mood morphology (Cuza and Miller, 2015; Silva-Corvalán, 2014). In addition to cross language interaction, other factors play a crucial role in the development of a morphosyntactic system in the minority language, including reduced input and use, age of onset of

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bilingualism, as well as structure complexity and frequency. More recently, researchers have postulated that the structural asymmetries found between bilingual and monolingual linguistic systems stem from the restructuring of native language (L1) functional features, and the development of a new feature matrix that encompasses properties of either language (Putnam and Sánchez, 2013).

The current study contributes to this previous discussion by examining the extent to which child heritage speakers of Spanish have knowledge of obligatory subject verb inversion, an area of research so far underexplored among Spanish heritage children. Interrogative inversion is obligatory for both matrix (1) and embedded (2) questions in most varieties of Spanish, with the exception of the Caribbean dialect, where non-inversion is the norm (Goodall, 2011; Gutiérrez-Bravo, 2008; Ordóñez and Olarea, 2006; Pérez-Leroux and Dalious, 1998; Suárez, 1994; Villa-García et al., 2009). In English, in contrast, only matrix questions involve auxiliary inversion (*do* support) leading to potential patterns of cross-linguistic influence:

- |     |   |                              |
|-----|---|------------------------------|
| (1) | <i>¿A quién conoció Dora?</i><br>“Who did Dora meet?”                 | Matrix <i>wh</i> -question   |
| (2) | <i>No sé a quién conoció Dora</i><br>“I don’t know who did Dora meet” | Embedded <i>wh</i> -question |

While the acquisition of subject–verb inversion in Spanish monolingual children is complete by the age of 3;0 (Pérez-Leroux and Dalious, 1998; Serrat and Capdevila, 2001), previous research with English-speaking second language (L2) learners (Bruhn De Garavito, 2002; Guijarro-Fuentes and Larrañaga, 2011; Mandell, 1998) and adult heritage speakers of Spanish (Cuza, 2013) shows significant non-inversion patterns in both the production and interpretation of inverted interrogative [+*wh*] sentences. This is particularly so with embedded *wh*-questions, which appear to be more difficult to process.

In contrast with previous work, the current study presents new cross-sectional data from twenty-seven ( $n = 27$ ) Spanish heritage children (age range, 5;0–13;3) born and raised in Northwestern Indiana (U.S.), and eighteen ( $n = 18$ ) monolingual children (age range, 6;6–12;4) from Guadalajara, Mexico, serving as control baseline. Results show low levels of subject verb inversion among the bilingual children, crucially with embedded *wh*-questions. I argue that the structural asymmetries stem from three interrelated factors: crosslinguistic influence from English, complexity issues, and language dominance (Argyri and Sorace, 2007; Montrul and Sánchez-Walker, 2013; Sorace et al., 2009; Strik and Pérez-Leroux, 2011; Yip and Matthews, 2000). I conclude that heritage Spanish children follow a different albeit complete developmental path, as far as this construction is concerned, which leads to the formation of a new system similar to that of native speakers of Caribbean Spanish (Toribio, 2000).

The study is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a syntactic analysis of obligatory inversion in Mainstream Spanish, Caribbean Spanish and in American English. This is followed by a review of previous acquisition research in Section 3. The study is presented in Section 4, followed by the results in Section 5. The discussion and conclusions are presented in Sections 6 and 7.

## 2. The syntax of subject–verb inversion in Spanish *wh*-questions

Spanish and English behave differently regarding their surface word order for argument *wh*-questions. In Spanish, the verb appears to the left of the subject and adjacent to the *wh*-word, in both matrix and embedded questions (3a and 3c). A subject in preverbal position would render a *wh*-question ungrammatical (3b and 3d), except for Caribbean Spanish, where non-inversion is typically the norm (Buesa-García, 2008; Camacho, 2013; Ordóñez and Olarea, 2006; Toribio, 2000) or in adjunct *wh*-questions introduced by *por qué* (“why”) (Contreras, 1991; Torrego, 1984). This is known in the literature as subject–verb inversion (Goodall, 2011; Pesetsky and Torrego, 2001; Zagana, 2002). In English, however, the subject appears to the right of the auxiliary in matrix questions (4a). This phenomenon is known as subject–auxiliary inversion (Adger, 2003; Chomsky, 1995; Radford, 2014). With embedded questions, the subject appears to the left of the lexical verb (4c). This is represented below:

### Spanish:

- |      |  |  |
|------|--|--|
| (3a) | <i>¿Dónde puso Dora los libros?</i>            | Matrix <i>wh</i> -question [WH-V-S]    |
| (3b) | <i>*¿Dónde Dora puso los libros?</i>           | Matrix <i>wh</i> -question *[WH-S-V]   |
| (3c) | <i>Me pregunto dónde puso Dora los libros</i>  | Embedded <i>wh</i> -question [WH-V-S]  |
| (3d) | <i>*Me pregunto dónde Dora puso los libros</i> | Embedded <i>wh</i> -question *[WH-S-V] |

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