

Subject inversion in non-native Spanish

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Abstract

This study presents new empirical evidence on the L2 acquisition of Spanish SV–VS contrasts, a syntax-pragmatics interface phenomenon. Results from a context-dependant preference task involving unergative and unaccusative verbs in different focus situations (broad and narrow focus) reveal that beginner and intermediate English speakers prefer SV in all contexts. In contrast, advanced learners, who clearly know that VS is possible in Spanish, show a pattern of optionality with unergative verbs (in both broad and narrow focus contexts), whereas VS is correctly preferred with unaccusative verbs in both broad and narrowly-focused contexts. We argue that these results can be explained by a representational deficit according to which the VS order is overgeneralised to unergative verbs regardless of the discursive situation. We argue that learners' overuse of VS structures is exacerbated by the lack of clear evidence for the use of SV and VS forms in the native input.

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1. Introduction¹

The acquisition of Spanish word order is an area of persistent difficulty for non-native speakers of Spanish (Ocampo, 1990; Hertel, 2003; De Miguel, 1993; Camacho, 1999; Licerias and Díaz, 1999; Lozano, 2006a,b, 2013; Domínguez, 2007, 2013; Domínguez and Arche, 2008; Hertel and Pérez-Leroux, 1999). Despite recent research on this issue, the reason why this area is problematic for learners even at advanced levels of proficiency still remains unclear. This study re-examines this issue by focusing on the effects that syntactic properties that license postverbal subjects and the broad/narrow focus distinction (whether the subject is focused or not) have on the distribution of SV/VS contrasts:

- (1) Broad focus (*What happened?*)
a. Juan estornudó (unergative SV)
Juan sneezed-past.3rd.sg
'Juan sneezed'

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- b. Llegó Juan (unaccusative VS)
Arrived-past.3rd.sg Juan
'Juan arrived'
- (2) Narrow focus (*Who sneezed?/Who arrived?*)
- a. Estornudó Juan (unergative VS)
Sneezed-past.3rd.sg Juan
'Juan sneezed'
 - b. Llegó Juan (unaccusative VS)
Arrived-past.3rd.sg Juan
'Juan arrived'

Examining how non-native speakers acquire word order alternations such as in (1) and (2), a syntax-pragmatics interface phenomenon, directly contributes to our understanding of the role that linguistic interfaces play in second language acquisition (see Sorace, 2011; Domínguez, 2013) and what causes optionality (the existence of two or more competing forms with the same interpretation) in non-native grammars.

Two main accounts to explain problems in acquiring verb–subject inversion have been proposed in the literature. For some, the observed difficulty is caused by a representational deficit which affects syntactic properties of intransitive verbs; in particular, it has been argued that learners first assume that the underlying syntactic structure of unergative verbs (structures where the subject is generated in the specifier of vP) applies for unaccusative verbs (structures where the subject is generated in the sister position to the lexical verb) as well. This hypothesis was formalised by Oshita (2001) as the 'Unaccusative Trap Hypothesis' (UTH), and it is based on the presupposition that learners initially treat the subject as the external argument in all intransitive structures, therefore treating unaccusatives as unergatives. L2 speakers are reported to be able to recover from this initial misanalysis and fully acquire the target grammar (Zobl, 1989; Sorace, 1995; Hertel and Pérez-Leroux, 1999; Toth, 2000; Hirakawa, 2003; Lee, 2004; Montrul, 2005). The reverse overgeneralisation pattern (i.e. the overuse of unaccusatives in unergative contexts) has also been found in advanced stages of acquisition (Yuan, 1996, 1999; Hertel, 2003).

For others, the source of the issue resides in the very fact that subject–verb order in Spanish is an interface phenomenon, governed by both pragmatic and syntactic constraints, and interface phenomena are argued to be more prone to instability and acquired later than other phenomena which only involve narrow syntax (Sorace, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2011; Belletti et al., 2007; Tsimpli et al., 2004; Tsimpli, 2007). This is known as the 'Interface Hypothesis' (IH) (Sorace, 2005, 2011; Sorace and Filiaci, 2006; Tsimpli and Sorace, 2006). Consistent with the view that full access to UG is possible (Schwartz and Sprouse, 1994, 1996), proponents of the IH argue that L2 speakers can successfully acquire syntactic representations of the target language and that problems arise from difficulties mapping syntax onto external grammatical modules (e.g. discourse-pragmatics). Failure to achieve this mapping gives rise to ambiguity and optionality in L2 grammars (Sorace, 2005; Sorace and Serratrice, 2009). Sorace argues that L2 speakers may not always have access to the computational resources necessary to coordinate and integrate knowledge from different linguistic domains when acquiring interface phenomena (such as postverbal subjects). As a result of this processing breakdown, learners can access both a form/structure available in the L1 and the corresponding form/structure in the L2, what Sorace (1993) calls *residual optionality* (see also Sorace, 2011).²

Two recent studies on the L2 acquisition of Spanish postverbal subjects, Hertel (2003) and Lozano (2006a), have argued that advanced learners can acquire the syntactic properties which distinguish between unergative and unaccusative verbs (see also Zobl, 1989; Sorace, 1995; Hertel and Pérez-Leroux, 1999) but present contradictory results regarding the acquisition of properties at the syntax-pragmatics interface. Hertel administered a written production task to eighty-one English speakers of Spanish at four proficiency levels (beginners, low-intermediates, advanced-intermediates and advanced). This study shows that use of VS increases with proficiency (first uses only observed in the advanced-intermediate group) and that advanced speakers use inversion in narrow-focus contexts, a result which does not support the main predictions of the IH. Hertel also shows that advanced learners show a high use (33.17%) of VS structures in unergative broad contexts (those where the SV structure should be preferred instead). This result, which cannot be accounted for by L1 transfer, Oshita's UTH or the IH, is also found in other previous studies (Pérez-Leroux and Glass, 1997, 1999; Papp, 2000; Yuan, 1996, 1999; Lozano and Mendikoetxea, 2010; Domínguez, 2013). The study reported in (Domínguez, 2013) is particularly relevant as it is based on production data obtained from the same participants which took part in the present study. Using data elicited by a controlled interview, the results show that the use of VS in intransitive structures increases with proficiency although it

² Some recent SLA studies have shown that interface deficits are in fact selective and do not affect all structures at the syntax-pragmatics interface equally (see e.g. Lozano, 2009; Rothman, 2008, 2009).

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