

Topic, focus and unaccusativity determining subject position in Spanish as a heritage language in the Netherlands

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Subject position in Spanish has traditionally been argued to be constrained by two factors: The first factor concerns unaccusativity: subjects follow unaccusative predicates but precede unergative predicates (Suñer, 1982).

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

The second factor relates to focus (Zubizarreta, 1998): in narrow presentational focus, the subject is placed after the verb, regardless of predicate type:

- |     |              |   |
|-----|--------------|---|
| (1) | UNACCUSATIVE | <i>¿Quién llegó? Llegó Juan.</i><br>Who arrived? arrived John   |
| (2) | UNERGATIVE   | <i>¿Quién gritó? Gritó Juan.</i><br>Who screamed? Screamed John |

The Interface Hypothesis (IH) (Sorace & Serratrice, 2009) predicts focus, located at the external interface between syntax and discourse, to be more vulnerable in bilingual populations, than unaccusativity, which pertains to the internal interface between syntax and semantics.

In the present paper we are interested in a population which represents the end-state of bilingual acquisition: heritage speakers. Several studies have investigated the above described factors determining subject position for heritage speakers of Spanish with English as their dominant language (Montrul, 2005; Zapata et al., 2005; de Prada Pérez & Pascual y Cabo, 2012). However, the results of these studies do not provide clear answer to the question which of the two factors is more vulnerable. Furthermore, the attested monolingual patterns are not consistent and often do not correspond to what theoretical grammars predict. This may be due to overlooked confounding variables such as verbal aspect, animacy, definiteness and heaviness of the subject, as suggested by Roggia (2011).

The present study compared heritage speakers (N=17) of Spanish with Dutch as their dominant language to a control group of 18 monolingual Spanish speakers, using an acceptability judgment task. The task aimed at testing effects of predicate type (unergative vs. unaccusative) and focus (broad vs. narrow) and included definiteness of the subject as an additional explanatory variable. The items were controlled for confounding variables such as aspect, animacy and subject heaviness.

Mixed effects models were run on both groups. The results are depicted in Figure 1. The monolingual data show significant effects of focus ( $p < 0.001$ ), predicate type ( $p < 0.05$ ), and definiteness ( $p < 0.01$ ). For the heritage speakers, focus ( $p < 0.05$ ) and predicate type ( $p = 0.01$ ) were significant factors, but definiteness was not ( $p = 0.31$ ).

We take the results for the heritage speakers as tentative support for the IH, given that the most vulnerable factor, definiteness, is related to topicality and thus pertains to the external interface between syntax and information structure.

Furthermore, the heritage speakers prefer postverbal subjects more than monolinguals do ( $p < 0.01$ ), unlike what has been found for bilingual populations where English is the dominant language. We relate this difference to the greater evidence of postverbal subjects in Dutch due to V2 in root clauses.

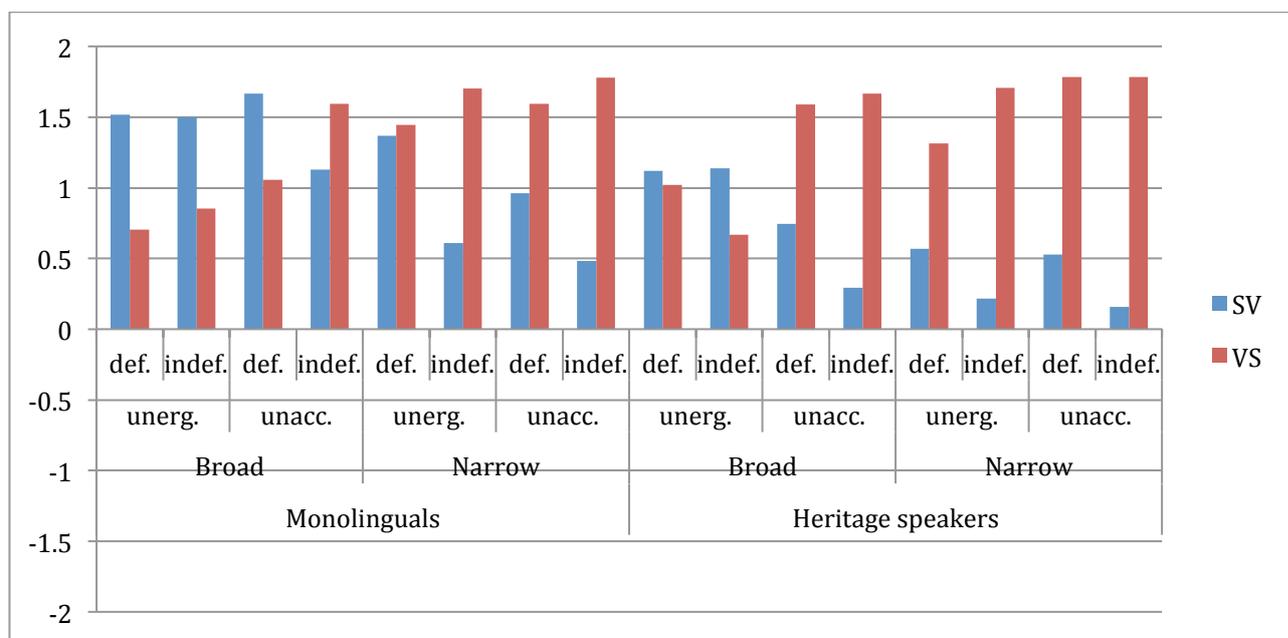


Figure 1: The two groups' mean ratings on SV and VS orders in all conditions.

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