SUBJECT POSITION IN L2 SPANISH

Information structure imposes changes in word order in Romance languages such as Spanish (Demonte 1994) and Italian (Belleti 2001). In Spanish, as a result of pragmatic constraints, constituents introducing new information in discourse tend to appear in final position, where they receive prosodic prominence (Zubizarreta 1998). In addition, syntactic constraints impose the use of post-verbal subjects in broad focus statements with unaccusative verbs (Ocampo 1995). English speakers, on the other hand, use a fixed word order and modify the intonational contour in order to highlight new information (Vallduví and Engdahl 1996; Zubizarreta 1998). Previous studies (Hertel 2003; Lozano 2006; Domínguez 2007; Domínguez and Arche 2014, among other) have shown that only advanced speakers accept and produce post-verbal subjects in those contexts where they would be felicitous. The evidence on which type of constraint is acquired first is, nonetheless, conflicting. This study examines the acceptability of pre-verbal and post-verbal subjects in discursive contexts that have already been explored in previous studies (i.e. broad focus and subject focus) as well as in contexts that have not been considered before, as it is the case with VP focus. The hypothesis is that learners will overgeneralize and accept infelicitous word orders as a result of being unaware of the constraints regulating their use regardless of their type (i.e. syntactic or pragmatic) and their exposure to conflicting input (Domínguez and Arche 2014). Differences based on proficiency level are as well expected.

The task designed to test these hypotheses was an acceptability judgment task in which the same utterance, displaying either a pre-verbal or a post-verbal subject, was introduced as the answer to four different questions: one conveying broad focus, one conveying VP focus, one conveying subject focus, and a filler question (see *example 1*). Three different types of verbs were included: unaccusatives, unergatives and transitives, so as to consider syntactic differences. Participants were asked to rate the acceptability of the response given the question using a 5-point Likert scale. Using this design, participants are therefore considering one unique response in different contexts, instead of choosing one response over another, as in previous studies. In total, the task consisted of 18 items: 6 for each type of verb, half of them displaying pre-verbal subjects while post-verbal subjects were used in the other half. Two versions of the experiment were created so as to obtain data from each verb and each possible word order. The task was administered to three experimental groups, with 14 participants in each one of them: native speakers, advanced learners, and intermediate learners. Two-way repeated measures ANOVA's and t-tests were run in order to determine where the significant differences resided.

Similarly to what previous studies have shown, advanced speakers behaved in a more native-like manner than intermediate learners, disfavoring post-verbal subjects in contexts of VP focus (see *table 1*), as well as in contexts of broad focus with unergative and transitive verbs; intermediate learners only did so with transitive verbs. Nonetheless, significant differences were still found between native speakers and advanced learners. In addition, non-native speakers did not block the acceptability of pre-verbal subjects in those cases where native speakers rejected them (e.g. in contexts of subject focus, especially with intransitive verbs). Differences on performance were not exclusively explained by the type of constraint involved, but also as a function of the syntactic category of the verb. Thus, these tendencies cannot be accounted for by L2 representation theories such as the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace and Filiaci 2006), which claims that purely syntactic constraints are acquired before those in the syntax-pragmatics interface. Instead, the Multiple Grammars theory (Amaral and Roeper 2012) can provide a better explanation, as it contemplates the possibility of learners' having access to different "parallel rule-sets" and assigning different rates of productivity to those rules.

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(1)   Utterance: *Salió Camilo*

  a. Broad focus:
    -¿Qué pasó? 'What happened?
    - Salió Camilo
    Left Camilo
    'Camilo left

  b. Narrow focus on the subject:
    - ¿Quién salió? 'Who left?
    - Salió Camilo

  c. Narrow focus on the VP:
    - ¿Qué hizo Camilo? 'What did Camilo do?'
    - Salió Camilo

  d. Filler question:
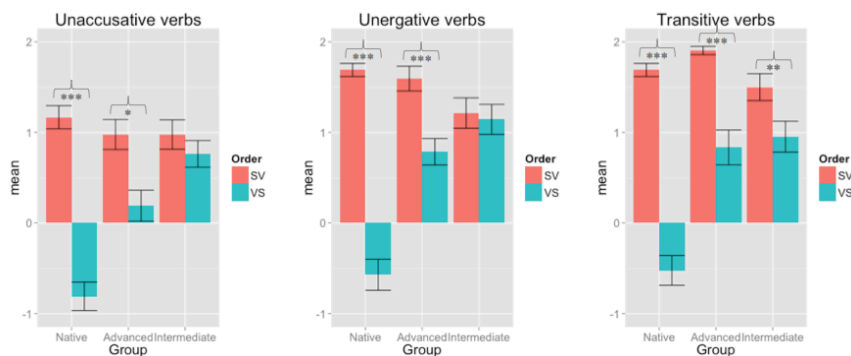   *- ¿Qué perdió Camilo? 'What did Camilo lose?'*
    - Salió Camilo

Table 1. Mean acceptability ratings in the VP focus condition