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Subject Position in Spanish as a Heritage Language in the Netherlands: Interface Vulnerability and Cross-linguistic Influence

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Heritage speakers
Speakers of a minority language, acquired during childhood in a naturalistic setting in the home context.

Subject position in Spanish
Spanish has flexible word order:

Un chico llegó un chico
Llegó un chico

Subject position with intransitives in Spanish is constrained by:

1. Verb type
2. Focus
3. Definiteness

Previous Research: Heritage Spanish in the US
• Comparing verb type & focus → unclear findings:
  - Verb type is robust (Montrul, 2005)
  - Verb type and focus are vulnerable (Zapata et al., 2005)
  - Verb type is more vulnerable than focus (de Prada-Perez & Pascual y Cabo, 2012)
• Heritage speakers overgeneralize preverbal subjects
  (Hinch Nava, 2007; Montrul, 2005; Zapata et al., 2005)

Method
Contextualized Scalar Acceptability Judgment Task:

Verb type
Unaccusative Unergative

Focus
Broad Narrow

Subject
Definite Indefinite

EXAMPLE: Unaccusative → narrow → indefinite
Es mi cumpleaños y hay mucha gente de visita en mi casa. De repente suena el timbre pero como justo estoy recibiendo un regalo de mi tío, no puedo abrir la puerta. Yo mi esposa y ve que son unos primos. Cuando regresa, le pregunto: ‘¿Quién llegó?’ Mi esposa me dice: ‘It’s my birthday and there are many guests in my house. Suddenly the doorbell rings, but since I’m just receiving a gift from my uncle, I cannot open the door. My wife goes and sees that it’s some cousins. When she gets back, I ask her: ’Who arrived?’ My wife tells me:’’

Results across conditions:

Results per condition

Experiment 1: Heritage Spanish in the Netherlands

Participants
24 heritage speakers
• Born in the Netherlands, or arrived before 5
• 1 Dutch speaking parent, 1 Spanish speaking parent
• No Caribbean dialects

18 monolingual speakers of Spanish
• Recently immigrated to the Netherlands.
• No knowledge of Dutch
• No Caribbean dialects

Hypotheses
1. Dutch HS of Spanish will show less overgeneralization of preverbal subjects
2. both focus and definiteness are more vulnerable than verb type

Results across conditions

Experiment 2: Heritage Spanish in the US

22 heritage speakers in New Jersey
• Born in the US, or arrived before 5
• 2 Spanish speaking parents
• No Caribbean dialects
• Proficiency-matched to the Dutch HS

Conclusions
1. Dutch heritage speakers show knowledge of the factors verb type, focus, and not definiteness
   → Partial support for the Interface Hypothesis
2. In judgment, Dutch heritage speakers of Spanish overgeneralize postverbal subjects, whereas American HS do not prefer either order.
3. In production, American heritage speakers of Spanish overgeneralize preverbal subjects
   → Support for cross-linguistic influence

References

The Interface Hypothesis
(Quaid & Sension, 2011)

External interface (syntax-pragmatics/discourse)
more vulnerable

Internal interface (syntax-semantics)
less vulnerable

FOCUS & DEFINITENESS
more vulnerable

VERB TYPE
less vulnerable

Un chico llegó
Llegó un chico

Subject position in Dutch
Main clauses:

Een jongen floot
A boy whistled

Un chico llegó
Llegó un chico

But... V2:

Buiten/er schreeuwde een jongen
Outside/There shouted a boy

Un chico llegó
Llegó un chico

MORE EVIDENCE FOR POSTVERBAL SUBJECTS

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