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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   silbó     Llegó    un chico
A boy         whistled     Arrived    a boy

Heritage speakers overgeneralize preverbal subjects

(Hinch Nava, 2007; Montrul, 2005; Zapata et al., 2005)

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-Pérez & Pascual y Cabo, 2012)
• Heritage speakers overgeneralize preverbal subjects

(Sorace & Serratrice, 2009)

Subject position in Dutch
Main clauses:

Een jongen  floot
A boy        whistled

But... V2:

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

MORE EVIDENCE FOR POSTVERBAL SUBJECTS

Unaccusative
Un chico      llegó       Llegó    un chico
A boy        arrived     Arrived    a boy

Results across conditions:

Conclusions
1. Dutch heritage speakers show knowledge of the factors verb type, focus, and noun definiteness
   → Partial support for the Interface Hypothesis
2. In judgment, Dutch heritage speakers of Spanish overgeneralize preverbal 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

The Interface Hypothesis
(Glezer & Szmrecsanyi, 2013)

External interface
(syntax-pragmatics
discourse)

Internal interface
(syntax-semantics)

Focus & Definiteness
more vulnerable

Verb Type
more vulnerable

Subject position in English or Simplification?

Subject position with intransitives in Spanish is constrained by:

1. Verb type
2. Focus
3. Definiteness

Unaccusative
• Un chico      llegó       Llegó    un chico
  A boy        arrived     Arrived    a boy

Unacc. Unerg.

Examples: 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. Y 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 says that it’s some cousins. When she gets back, I ask her: “Who arrived?”. My wife tells me:

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

Method
Contextualized Scalar Acceptability Judgment Task:
Verb type & focus & definiteness

Unacc. Unerg.

Unaccusative

Unacc. Unerg.

Unaccusative

Results per condition

Heritage speakers

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

References