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Citation for published version (APA):

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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
A boy arrived

Llegó un chico
Arrived a boy

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 Pérez & Pascual y Cabo, 2012)
• Heritage speakers overgeneralize preverbal subjects
  (Sorace & Serratrice, 2009)

Method
Contextualized Scalar Acceptability Judgment Task:

Verb type
Unaccusative Unergative

Focus
Broad Narrow

Subject
Definite Indefinite

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

Subject position in Dutch
Main clauses:

Een jongen fluit
A boy whistles

But... V2:

Buiten/er schreeuwend een jongen
Outside/There shouting a boy

Adv V S

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

Results across conditions:

Subject position in Dutch

Conclusions
1. Dutch heritage speakers show knowledge of the factors verb type, focus, and 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

References