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Publication date
2015

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Osch, B. A., Aalberse, S. P., Hulk, A. C. J., & Sleeman, A. P. (2015). *Variable subject verb word order in heritage speakers of Spanish in the Netherlands*. Paper presented at NAP-dag 2015, Amsterdam.

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Variable subject verb word order in heritage speakers of Spanish in the Netherlands

Brechje van Osch, University of Amsterdam
NAP-dag, 20-11-2015



Heritage speakers

- Specific type of bilingual

“[a] heritage language is acquired as a minority language within a majority language environment through naturalistic exposure in the home context (Rothman, 2009)

- Often children of immigrants (or 2nd / 3^d / 4th generation)
- Simultaneous or sequential bilinguals
- Switch to majority language
- Often end up being not native-like in their heritage language

+ Linguistic Interfaces

- Phenomena where syntax interfaces with other modules
- Interface phenomena have been found to be vulnerable for heritage speakers and other bilingual populations
(Tsimpli et al., 2004; Sorace & Filiaci, 2006; Iverson et al, 2008; Montrul et al., 2008)

+ Interface Hypothesis

The Interface Hypothesis (Sorace & Filiaci, 2006; Sorace & Seratrice, 2009; Sorace, 2011; Tsimpli et al., 2004):

Phenomena located at the interfaces cause more problems for bilingual speakers than phenomena located in a single domain of grammar

Single module phenomena

(e.g. pure syntax)

»

Internal interface phenomena

(e.g. syntax-semantics, syntax-morphology)

»

External interface phenomena

(e.g. syntax-pragmatics, syntax-discourse)

Processing account

+ Testing the Interface Hypothesis



1. Mood in Spanish

2. Subject verb word order

+ Testing the Interface Hypothesis



1. Mood in Spanish

SYNTAX

»

INTERNAL INTERFACE

»

EXTERNAL INTERFACE

(syntax-semantics)

(e.g. syntax-pragmatics,
syntax-discourse)

+ Testing the Interface Hypothesis



1. Mood in Spanish

SUBJECT	SYNTAX	INTERNAL INTERFACE	EXTERNAL INTERFACE
14	yes	yes	yes
16	yes	yes	yes
73	yes	yes	yes
1	yes	yes	no
2	yes	yes	no
3	yes	yes	no
8	yes	yes	no
9	yes	yes	no
37	yes	yes	no
48	yes	yes	no
51	yes	yes	no
60	yes	yes	no
65	yes	yes	no
20	yes	no	no
41	yes	no	no
59	yes	no	no
69	yes	no	no

+ Testing the Interface Hypothesis



1. Mood in Spanish

2. Subject verb word order

+ Subject verb word order

Spanish has variable word order with intransitive predicates.

It is constrained by syntactic/semantic and discourse constraints:

- **SYNTAX-SEMANTICS:** Word order depends on the predicate type:

- **Unergative** verbs generally have **preverbal** subjects

Juan gritó

Juan shouted

S **V**

- **Unaccusative** verbs generally have **postverbal** subjects:

Llegó Juan

Juan arrived

V **S**

+ Subject verb word order

Spanish has variable word order with intransitive predicates.

It is constrained by syntactic/semantic and discourse constraints:

- **SYNTAX-SEMANTICS:** Word order depends on the predicate type:

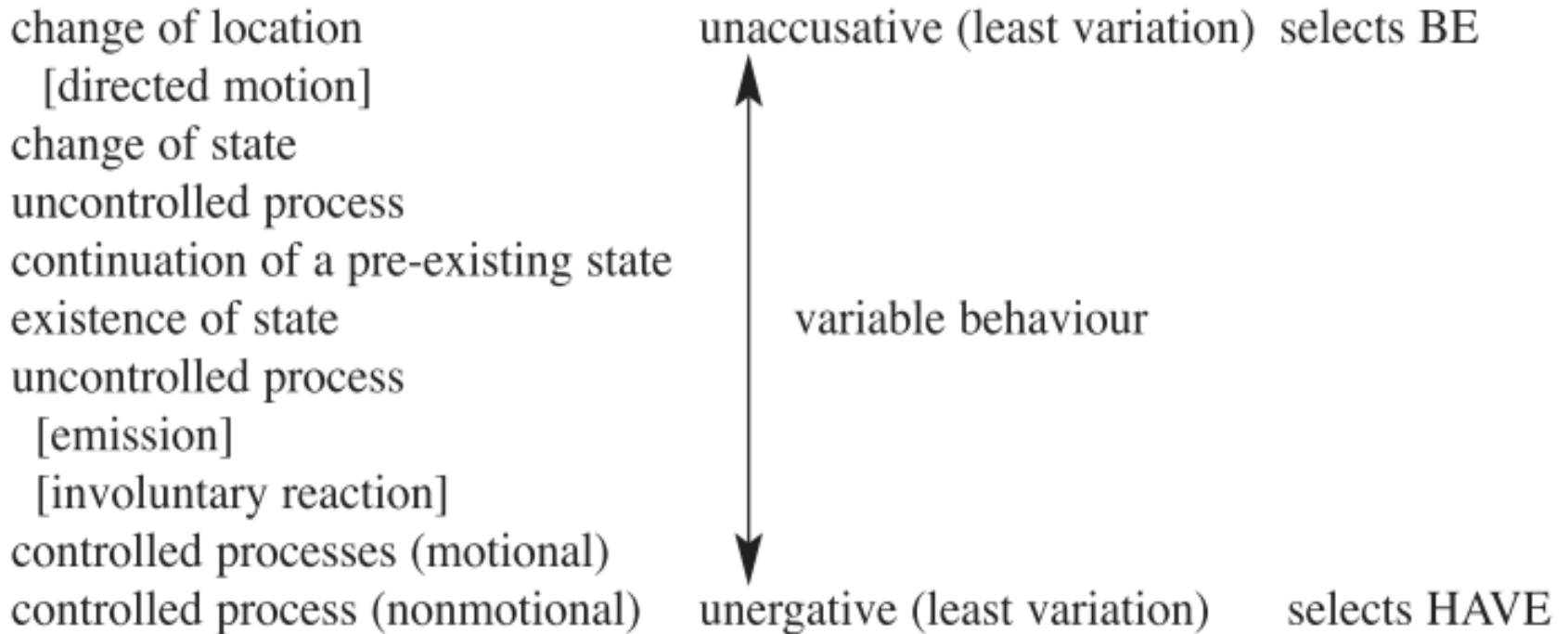
Is it **syntax** or **semantics**?

- **Unaccusative Hypothesis:** the single argument of unaccusatives is syntactically a direct object, while the single argument of unergatives is the subject. (e.g. Perlmutter, 1978; Burzio 1986; Rosen, 1984)
- **Unaccusativity hierarchy:** both syntactic and semantic aspects are involved. there is a universal continuum (Sorace, 2000)

+ Subject verb word order

Unaccusativity Hierarchy:

3) Sorace's (2000b) Unaccusativity Hierarchy:



+ Subject verb word order

Word order with intransitives in Spanish is constrained by both syntactic, semantic and discourse constraints:

- **SYNTAX-PRAGMATICS:** In narrow focus, subjects are postverbal, regardless of the verb type

- **Unergative** verbs:

Quién gritó?	Gritó Juan
Who shouted?	Juan shouted
	V S

- **Unaccusative** verbs:

Quién llegó?	Llegó Juan
Who arrived?	Juan arrived
	V S

+ Hypothesis

Interface Hypothesis: External interface phenomena are expected to be most vulnerable.

SYNTAX-PRAGMATICS

>

SYNTAX-SEMANTICS

more vulnerable

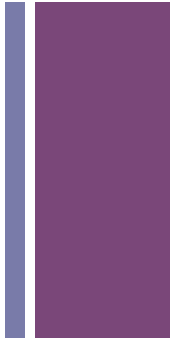
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less vulnerable

FOCUS

>

PREDICATE TYPE



+ Subject verb word order

	Broad focus	Narrow focus
Unergative predicates	SV	VS
Unaccusative predicates	VS	VS

+ Participants

- 17 heritage speakers
 - Age: 19-36
 - Educational level: university – **No students of Spanish!**
 - High-intermediate to advanced proficiency level (as measured by means of self-reports, the *DELE* and a lexical decision task)
 - Born in the Netherlands, 2nd generation
 - 1 Dutch speaking parent, 1 Spanish speaking parent
 - Parents' background: Spain, Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, Argentina

+ Participants

- 18 native speakers
 - Similar to the heritage speakers in terms of:
 - Age
 - Educational level
 - From different backgrounds: Spain, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Nicaragua, Venezuela

+ Method

Acceptability Judgment Task

- Contextualized. Context ending in:
 - ¿Qué pasó? (*What happened?*) → introducing broad focus
 - ¿Quién + V? (*Who V-ed?*) → introducing narrow focus
- Prototypical unaccusative & unergative verbs
- Definite & indefinite subjects
- 2 sentences:
 - SV
 - VS
- Scalar rating (-2 to 2)
- Written and aural
- Untimed

+ Method

EXAMPLE: Broad focus - Unergative

Estoy solo en un centro comercial. Estoy hablando por teléfono con un amigo. De repente escucho un canto detrás mío. Es una mujer que parece un poco loca. Interrumpo a mi amigo y le pregunto: '¿Oíste?' Me contesta: 'No, ¿qué pasó?' Le digo:

I am alone in a shopping mall. I am talking on the phone to a friend. Suddenly I hear singing behind me. It is a woman who seems a bit crazy. I interrupt my friend and ask him: "Did you hear that?" He answers: "No. What happened?" I say:

Cantó una mujer. → **VS**

Sang a woman

○ ○ ● ○ ○
-2 -1 0 1 2

Una mujer cantó. → **SV**

A woman sang

○ ○ ○ ○ ●
-2 -1 0 1 2

	Broad	Narrow
Unergative	SV	VS
Unaccusative	VS	VS

+ Method

EXAMPLE: Narrow focus - Unaccusative

Roberto es director de una prisión. Hace poco, su amigo Pedro ha escuchado en la radio que un prisionero logró escaparse, pero no sabe quién exactamente. Le pregunta a Roberto: '¿Quién se escapó?' Roberto contesta:

Roberto is the manager of a prison. Recently, his friend Pedro heard on the radio that a prisoner succeeded to escape, but he doesn't know who exactly. He asks Roberto: "Who escaped?" Roberto answers:

Se escapó un mafioso peligroso → **VS**

Escaped a dangerous mafioso

○ ○ ○ ○ ●

-2 -1 0 1 2

Un mafioso peligroso se escapó. → **SV**

A dangerous mafioso escaped

○ ○ ● ○ ○

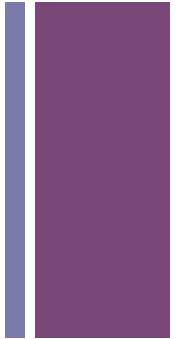
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	Broad	Narrow
Unergative	SV	VS
Unaccusative	VS	VS

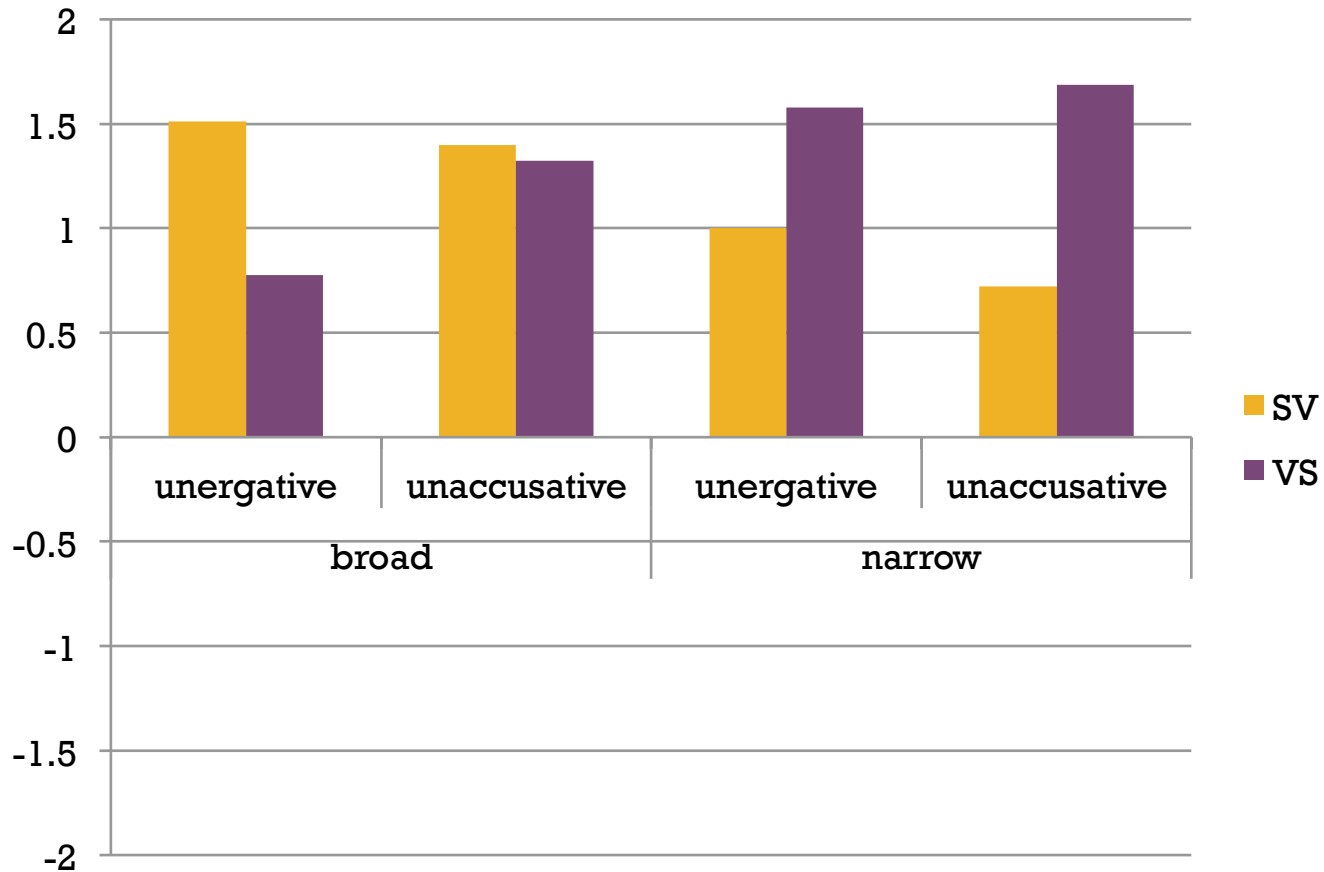
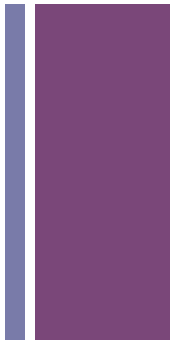
+ Results

Expected pattern:

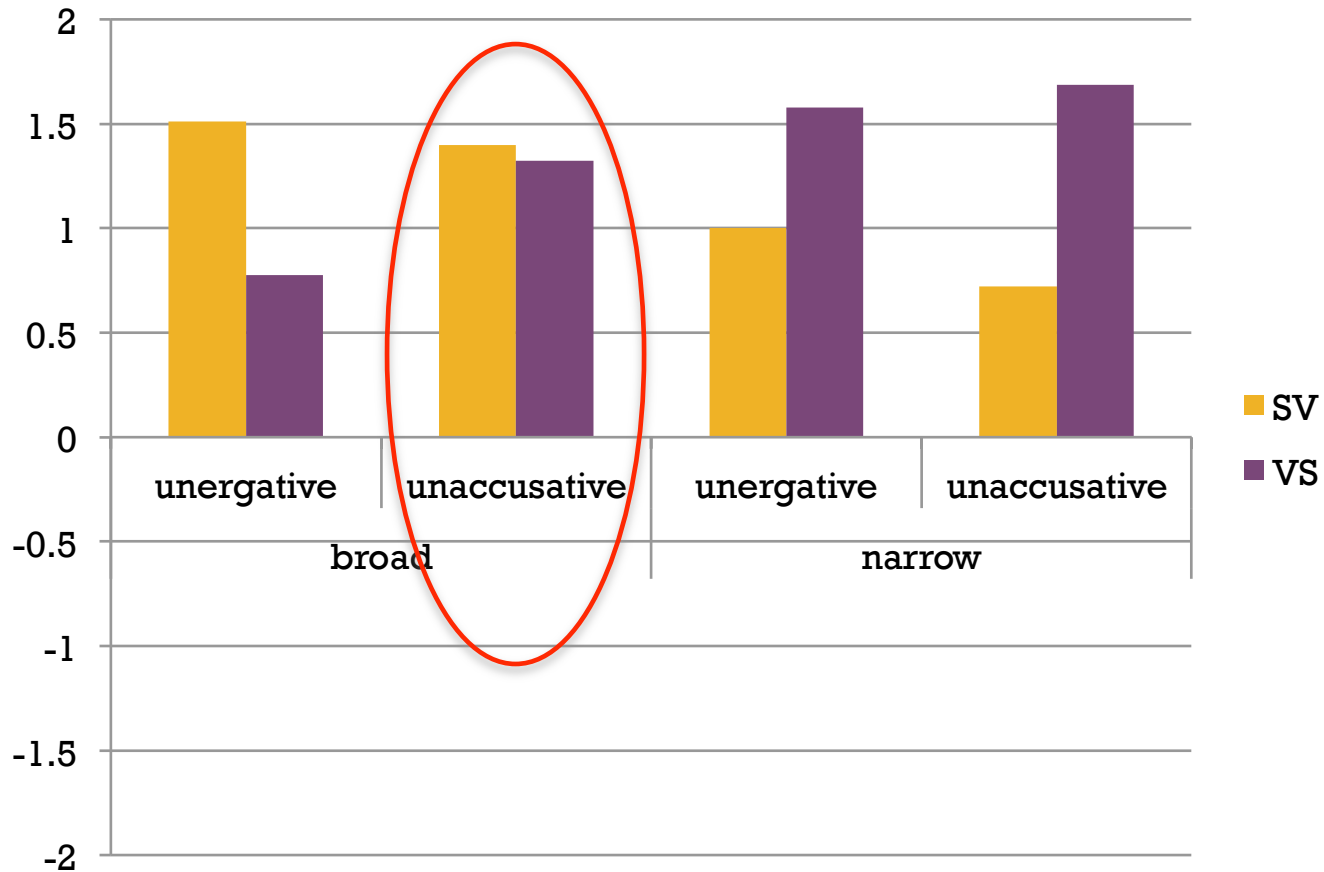
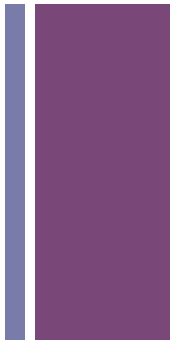
	Broad	Narrow
Unergative	SV	VS
Unaccusative	VS	VS



+ Results – Native speakers

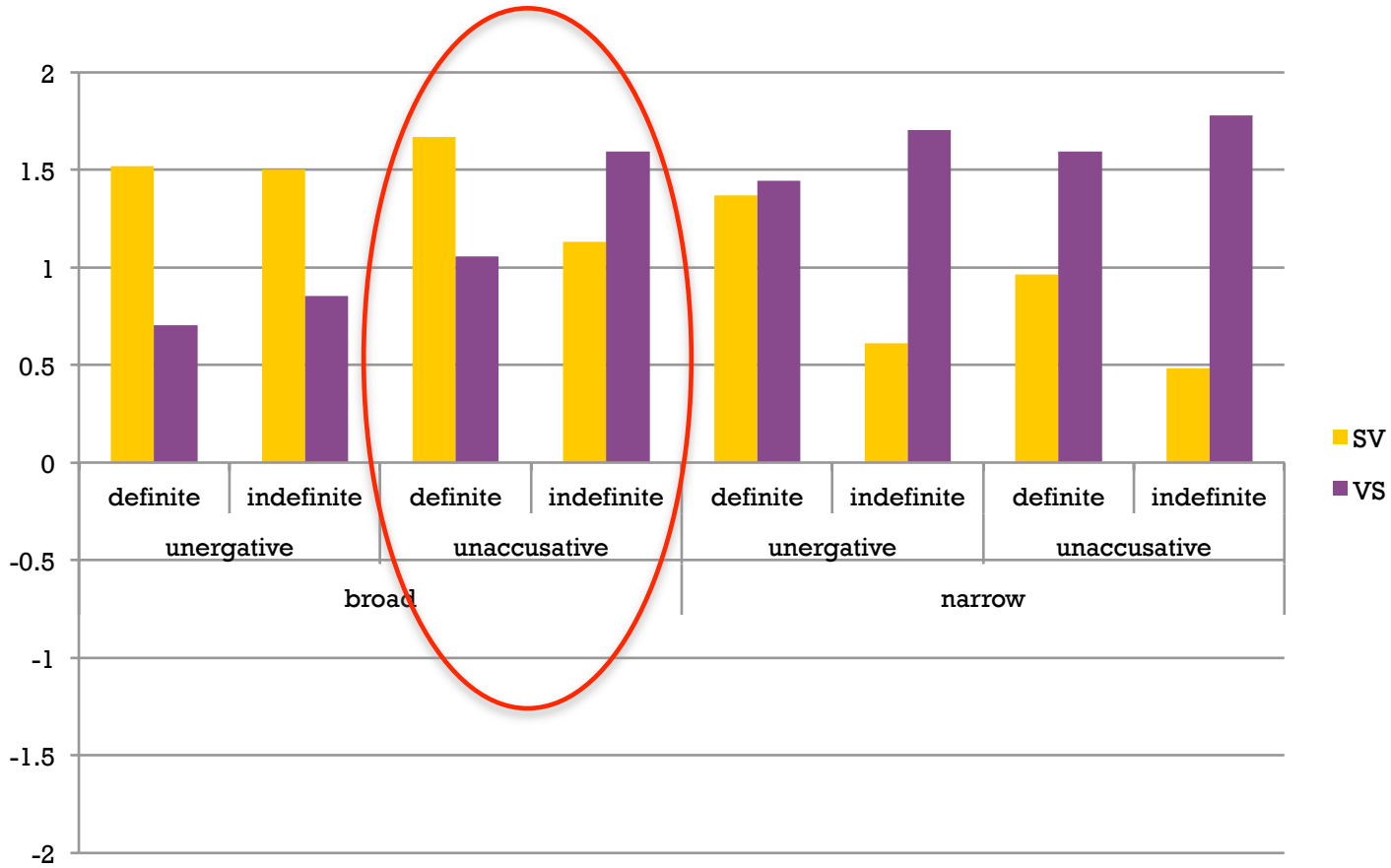


+ Results – Native speakers





Results – Native speakers



+ Results – Native speakers

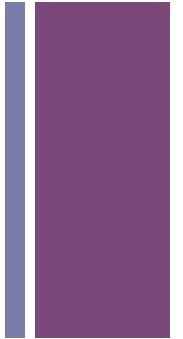
Mixed effects model:

Independent variables:

- Predicate type (unergative vs unaccusative)
- Focus (broad vs narrow)
- Definiteness (definite vs indefinite)

Dependent variable:

- Preference for VS



+ Results – Native speakers

Significant effects of:

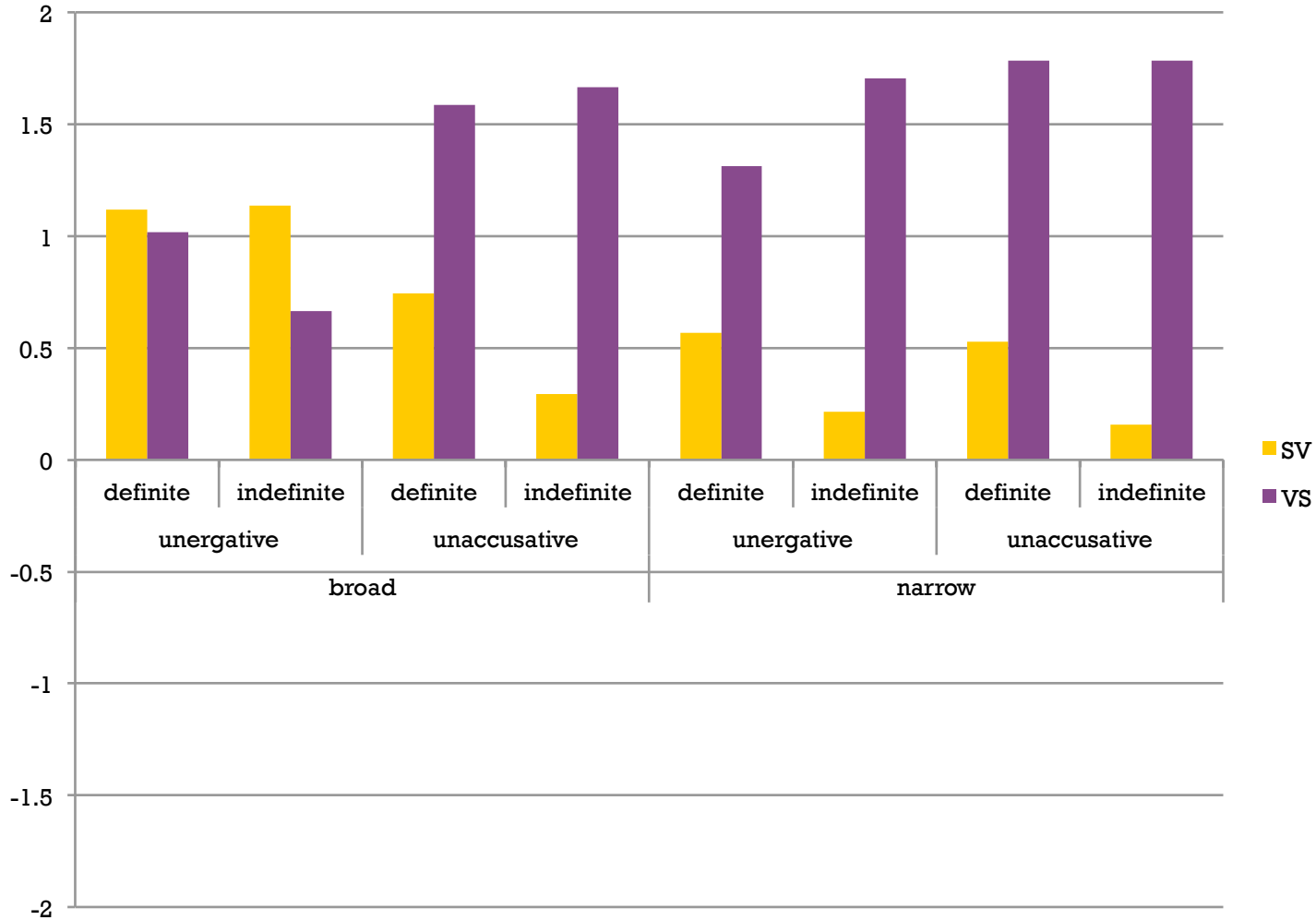
- Predicate type (t=-2.56, p=0.01)
- Focus (t=5.81, p=8.79*10⁻⁷)
- Definiteness (t=-3.61, p=8.34*10⁻⁴)

Native speakers rate VS relatively higher for

- Unaccusative predicates
- Narrow focus
- Indefinite subjects



Results – heritage speakers



+ Results – Heritage speakers

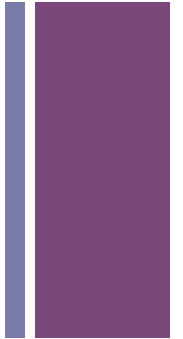
Mixed effects model:

Independent variables:

- Predicate type (unergative vs unaccusative)
- Focus (broad vs narrow)
- Definiteness (definite vs indefinite)

Dependent variable:

- Preference for VS



+ Results – Heritage speakers

Significant effects of:

- Predicate type (t=-2.79, p=0.008)
- Focus (t=2.83, p=0.007)
- **No significant effect of definiteness**

Heritage speakers rate VS relatively higher for

- Unaccusative predicates
- Narrow focus

But they do not make a distinction between definite & indefinite subjects

+ Hypothesis

Interface Hypothesis: External interface phenomena are expected to be most vulnerable.

SYNTAX-PRAGMATICS

>

SYNTAX-SEMANTICS

more vulnerable

less vulnerable

FOCUS

>

**PREDICATE TYPE
&
DEFINITENESS**

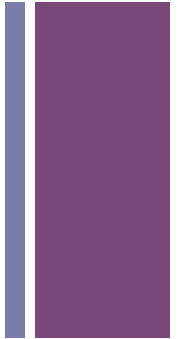
DEFINITENESS

>

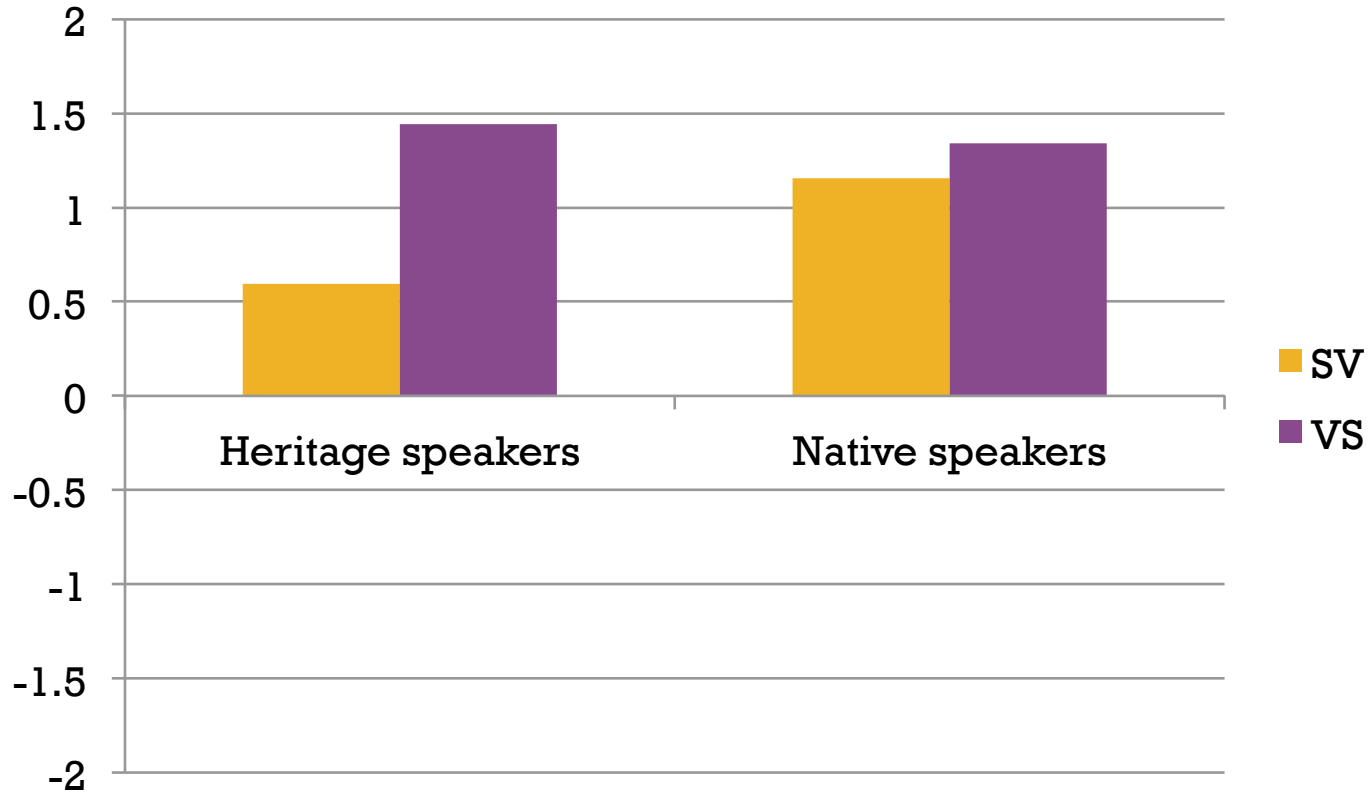
**FOCUS
&
PREDICATE TYPE**

more vulnerable

less vulnerable



+ Results word order



Heritage speakers give lower ratings to SV orders ($t=-3.06$, $p=0.003$)

+ Conclusion / Discussion

- Why do heritage speakers give lower ratings to SV orders, despite that fact that this is the *only allowed option* in their dominant language?
 - Strategy → go for the *different* option.
- Evidence against the Interface Hypothesis
- What is so difficult about definiteness?





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THANK YOU!