

Comparing Spanish Heritage Speakers with Different Dominant Languages: the Influence from Dutch and English on Subject Position.

In Spanish clauses with intransitive predicates, subject position is flexible (examples 1 and 2), but not constraint-free: felicitousness depends on various syntactic, semantic and discourse factors, such as unaccusativity (Suñer, 1982), focus (Zubizarreta, 1998) and definiteness (Roggia, 2013). It is a notoriously vulnerable area for bilingual populations (e.g. Zapata et al., 2005), possibly due to the fact that it pertains to several different interfaces (following the Interface Hypothesis, Sorace, 2011)

Subject position has been investigated for Spanish heritage speakers (hereafter: HS) in the US, who have English as their dominant language. What these studies report is 1) failure to show target-like knowledge of all factors involved (e.g. Zapata et al., 2005) and 2) overgeneralization of preverbal subjects compared to monolingual speakers (e.g. Hinch Nava 2007). The latter finding may be contributed to cross-linguistic influence from English; after all, postverbal subjects hardly occur in English, apart from a few restricted contexts.

Much less is known about heritage Spanish in combination with languages other than English. In Dutch, postverbal subjects occur frequently due to the V2-rule, which states that in root clauses the finite verb has to be in second position. Therefore, when a non-subject fills the first position we get the order X-V-S (example 3).

A contextualized scalar acceptability judgment task and a contextualized elicited production task were administered to 22 HS of Spanish in the Netherlands, 24 proficiency-matched HS in New Jersey, and 18 monolingual speakers of Spanish. All participants spoke non-Caribbean dialects of Spanish. The task was aimed at testing their knowledge of unaccusativity, focus and definiteness as factors determining subject position, as well as their overall preference for one of the two orders.

Following the Interface Hypothesis, knowledge of unaccusativity, which pertains to the syntax-semantics interface, was predicted to be more robust than the effects of focus, involving the syntax-discourse interface. Moreover, Dutch HS were expected to accept postverbal subjects more easily than their US counterparts, given their higher frequency of occurrence in Dutch.

The American HS did not prefer one order over the other in judgment (figure 1), but showed a clear overgeneralization of preverbal subjects in production (figure 2), in line with previous research (e.g. Hinch Nava, 2007). The Dutch HS on the other hand, showed a significant overgeneralization of postverbal subjects in judgment (figure 1). The production data for the Dutch HS and the monolingual Spanish controls are still being collected and will be discussed at the conference.

As expected, for the control group, all three factors were significant predictors of their word order preferences in the judgment task. The American HS, in both tasks, showed knowledge only of unaccusativity. For the Dutch HS' judgments, unaccusativity and focus were significant factors, but definiteness was not.

We suggest that the differential vulnerability of the different factors in this study can be accounted for by the Interface Hypothesis, which would predict unaccusativity to be more robust than focus and definiteness. Moreover, the difference between the two heritage groups with respect to word order preference patterns across conditions suggest differential cross-linguistic influence from the two dominant languages.

Examples:

- (1) *Juan llegó.*
John arrived
- (2) *Llegó Juan.*
Arrived John
- (3) *Gisteren liep de jongen naar het huis.*
Yesterday walked the boy to the house.

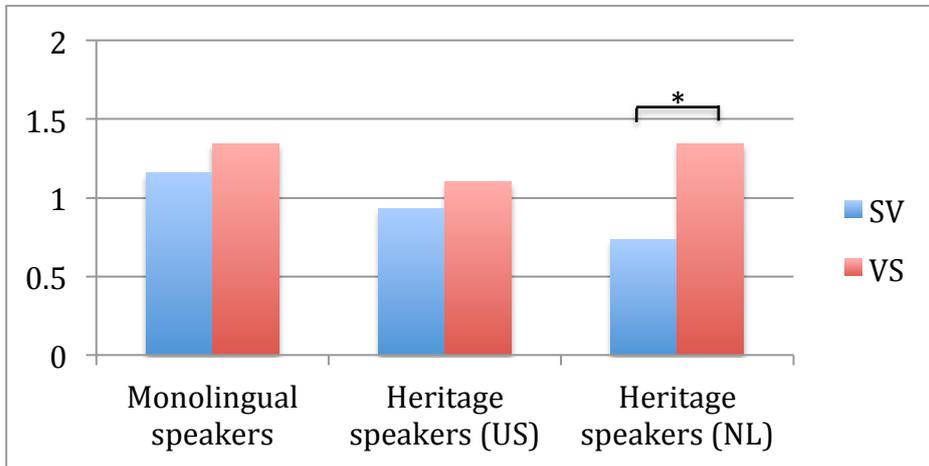


Figure 1: mean ratings in the acceptability judgment task

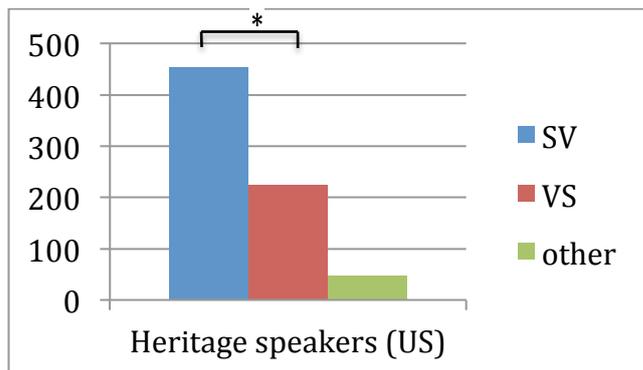


Figure 2: produced word orders by the American heritage speakers.

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