

Explicit knowledge on subject position in L2 and heritage Spanish in the Netherlands

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Heritage speakers and L2 speakers, apart from age of acquisition typically differ in other respects as well, namely the manner of acquisition (naturalistic vs. instructed) as well as the mode of language they are most familiar with (oral vs written). For this reason, it is not surprising that several studies have found differential task effects for these two groups of speakers: whereas heritage speakers do better on oral tasks and tasks that measure implicit knowledge L2 speakers have an advantage on written tasks measuring more explicit and metalinguistic knowledge (e.g. Montrul, 2011; Bowles, 2011).

This study compares heritage and L2 speakers of Spanish in the Netherlands on subject position in Spanish using an explicit task. Traditionally, subject position in Spanish has been argued to be constrained by two factors. The first factor concerns unaccusativity: subjects follow unaccusative predicates but precede unergative predicates (examples 1 and 2) (Suñer, 1982).

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|-----|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| (1) | UNERGATIVE | <i>Juan gritó.</i>
John screamed |
| (2) | UNACCUSATIVE | <i>Llegó Juan.</i>
Arrived John |

The second factor relates to focus (Zubizarreta, 1998): in narrow presentational focus, the subject is placed after the verb, regardless of predicate type (examples 3 and 4).

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|-----|--------------|---|
| (3) | UNERGATIVE | <i>¿Quién gritó? Gritó Juan.</i>
Who screamed? Screamed John |
| (4) | UNACCUSATIVE | <i>¿Quién llegó? Llegó Juan.</i>
Who arrived? arrived John |

Several studies have investigated this phenomenon, for either L2 (e.g. Hertel, 2003; Lozano, 2006) or heritage Spanish (e.g. Zapata et al., 2005; de Prada Pérez & Pascual y Cabo, 2012), but not comparing the two groups. These studies, which all focus on heritage speakers of Spanish in the US, typically report an overgeneralization of preverbal subjects on part of both bilingual groups.

The present study compared 18 L2 speakers and 17 heritage speakers of Spanish of equal (high) proficiency with Dutch as their dominant language. A control group of 18 monolingual Spanish speakers served as a baseline. The task contained 24 short stories ending with either the question “¿*Qué pasó?*” (“What happened?”, introducing broad focus) or “¿*Quién + verb?*” (“Who V-ed?”, introducing narrow focus). Two sentences followed each story: one with a preverbal subject and one with a postverbal subject. Both sentences had to be rated on a scale from -2 to 2. Unergative and unaccusative verbs were neatly divided over conditions. Furthermore, following (Roggia, 2011) definiteness of the subject was included as an additional explanatory variable and the items were controlled for aspect, animacy and subject heaviness.

In line with previous research, both bilingual groups were hypothesized to overgeneralize SV orders. Moreover, given the explicit nature of the task, we

expected L2 speakers, even though they had similar overall proficiency, to be more target-like than the heritage speakers, due to previous literature demonstrating differential task effects for these groups.

Mixed effects analyses were run on all three participant groups. The monolingual data showed significant main effects of focus ($p < 0.001$), predicate type ($p < 0.05$), and definiteness ($p < 0.01$). For the heritage speakers, focus ($p < 0.05$) and predicate type ($p = 0.01$) were significant factors, but definiteness was not ($p = 0.31$). For the L2 speakers, none of the factors were significant. The heritage speakers were thus more accurate in their preference patterns than L2 speakers with equal overall proficiency, contrary to our hypothesis. We suggest that this finding can be explained by the fact that word order is seldom explicitly taught in L2 Spanish courses.

Interestingly, across conditions, both bilingual groups prefer postverbal subjects more than monolinguals do (figure 1; $p < 0.01$ for both the heritage speakers and the L2 speakers), unlike what has been found for bilingual populations where English is the dominant language.

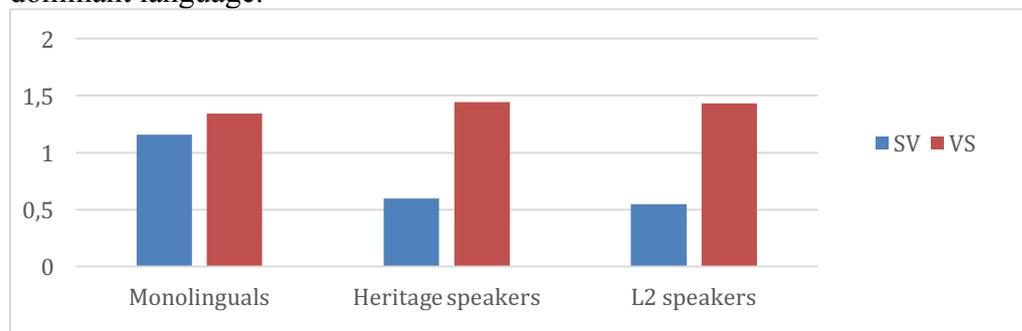


Figure 1: The three groups' mean ratings on SV and VS orders across conditions.

We hypothesize that this difference might be due to the greater evidence of postverbal subjects in Dutch due to V2 in root clauses. We are currently collecting production data to find out more about task effects and possible cross-linguistic influence from Dutch onto Spanish.

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