

Postverbal subjects in Heritage/L2 Spanish: Assessing effects of unaccusativity and adjunct placement

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Background: The Unaccusative Hypothesis (Perlmutter, 1978) distinguishes between two types of intransitive verbs: unergative verbs whose subject is generated in Spec-vP, and unaccusative verbs, whose subject is generated in complement position. The unergative/unaccusative distinction is more transparent in some languages than others: In French and Italian, each verb type selects a different auxiliary—BE and HAVE, respectively (Sorace, 2000). In Spanish, it is claimed that unaccusative verbs, but not unergative verbs, allow for a postverbal subject in declarative sentences with broad focus. Experimental studies with native speakers support this distinction, albeit not categorically. Sorace (2000) found that auxiliary selection preferences in Italian are influenced not only by verb type, but also by telicity. Similarly, experimental work in Spanish reveals that additional factors play a role in word order preferences, e.g., focus (Lozano, 2006; Zubizarreta, 1998) and adverbial placement (Roggia, 2011).

Given the differences between English and Spanish, studies have investigated word order preferences in heritage and L2 Spanish speakers. Montrul (2005) found that like non-heritage native speakers, heritage and L2 speakers all assigned higher ratings to postverbal subjects with unaccusative than unergative verbs. Lozano (2006) found that both native and L2 speakers preferred VS with unaccusative verbs in broad focus, but L2ers, unlike native speakers, did not prefer VS in narrow focus. Roggia (2011), did not find a preference for VS with unaccusative verbs in an acceptability judgment task with native speakers but did find that adverbial placement had a strong effect on word order preferences in a production task with the same population: in sentences with intransitive verbs, speakers preferred SV order with phrase-final adverbs and VS order with phrase-initial adverbs.

The lack of consistent results even among native speakers, the complexity of factors influencing word order in Spanish, and the fact that postverbal subjects with unaccusative verbs are not explicitly taught in the classroom make this structure worth exploring in detail.

Goal and experimental questions: In this study we aim to explore the roles of verb type and adjunct placement on the acceptability of postverbal subjects in Spanish among non-heritage native, heritage, and L2 speakers. We ask:

1. Do Spanish speakers indeed prefer the VS word order with unaccusative verbs?
2. Does adverbial position affect word order preferences in a judgment task?
3. Do non-heritage native Spanish speakers (NS), L2 Spanish speakers (L2), and heritage speakers (HS) show different preferences for word order along these factors?

Method: Three speaker groups are considered: control non-heritage native speakers ($N = 10$), heritage speakers ($N = 5$), and L2 (L1 English) ($N = 12$) speakers of Spanish (recruitment ongoing). Participants rated written sentences in an acceptability judgment task from 1, “It doesn’t sound natural at all” to 5, “It sounds completely natural.” Examples in (1) and (2) illustrate the two verb types tested:

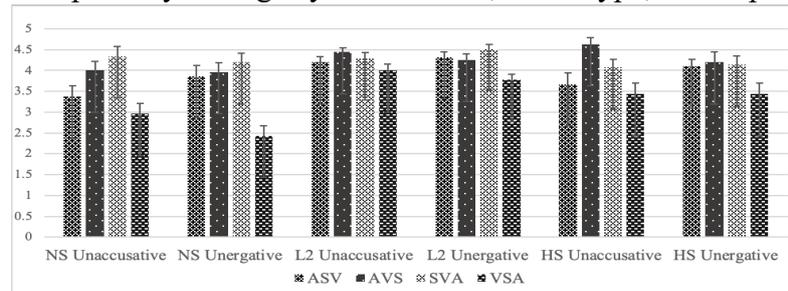
(1) *Juan nadó ahí. Unergative SVA*
Juan swim-PST-3SG there
‘John swam there.’

(2) *Entonces llegó Diego. Unaccusative AVS*
Then arrive-PST-3SG Diego
‘Diego arrived then.’

The task included 3 guided practice trials, 24 controls/fillers with transitive verbs, and 48 target sentences appearing in four different word orders: ASV, AVS, SVA, and VSA, 24 with unaccusative verbs and 24 with unergative verbs. Trials were balanced and pseudo-randomized, and all materials were presented in Spanish.

Results and discussion: We compared acceptability scores from preliminary results with linear mixed effects models using the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2020) in R. Fixed effects included verb type (unaccusative/unergative), subject position (pre-/postverbal), adverb position (phrase-initial/final), and population (NS, HS, and L2). We also included random intercepts for verb and participant.

Figure 1. Mean Acceptability Ratings by Word Order, Verb Type, and Population



We found adverb position to be a significant predictor ($p < .003$): phrase-initial adverbs were rated higher than phrase-final adverbs overall. The interaction between subject position and adverb position ($p < .001$) showed that postverbal subjects were rated higher with phrase-initial adverbs (AVS) than phrase-final adverbs (VSA), as expected. The interaction between verb type and subject position approached significance for NS ($p = .065$), and it was significant for HS ($p < .001$), and for L2ers ($p < .001$): postverbal subjects with unaccusative verbs were rated higher than postverbal subjects with unergative verbs, as expected. The interaction between subject position and group was significant ($p < .05$), with HS and L2ers rating postverbal subjects slightly higher than NS, an effect evident in Figure 1, where we can see that HS and L2ers assigned higher ratings than NS overall.

The present study demonstrates the importance of considering factors beyond verb type in the licensing of postverbal subjects in Spanish, especially adverb placement: preverbal subjects are dispreferred when adverbs are in phrase-initial position, particularly with unaccusative verbs, which may suggest they are competing for the same syntactic position (Zubizarreta, 1998). Importantly, we found that HS maintain expected preference for postverbal subjects with unaccusative verbs, suggesting this is a robust feature in their grammar, unlikely to undergo attrition. Moreover, we find that Spanish L2ers are in fact sensitive to both verb type and adjunct placement, which leads us to ask whether the input provides enough evidence for implicit learning or whether learners are attuned to this universal distinction even as adults.

Selected references: Lozano, C. (2006). Focus and split-intransitivity: the acquisition of word order alternations in non-native Spanish. *Second Language Research*, 22(2), 145-187. • Perlmutter, D. M. (1978). Impersonal passives and the unaccusative hypothesis. In *Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 4, 157-190. • Montrul, S. (2005). Second language acquisition and first language loss in adult early bilinguals: exploring some differences and similarities. *Second Language Research*, 21(3), 199-249. Roggia, A. (2011). Unaccusativity and word order in Mexican Spanish: An examination of syntactic interfaces and the split intransitivity hypothesis. *State College, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Doctoral dissertation*. • Sorace, A. (2000). Gradients in auxiliary selection with intransitive verbs. *Language*, 859-890 • Zubizarreta, M. L. (1998). *Prosody, focus, and word order*. MIT Press.