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**Topic, focus, and word order in the acquisition of Spanish**  
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## 1. Introduction

From the RRG perspective, one of the most important ways in which languages differ from each other is in terms of the manner in which discourse-pragmatics interacts with the linking between syntax and semantics (Van Valin 2005). In some languages, discourse-pragmatics can affect word order. Focus related word order variation is a well-attested phenomenon observed in a number of different languages.

### 1.1 Focus in Spanish

For Mexican Spanish, it has been demonstrated that in the unmarked case (the order attested in sentences that felicitously answer questions such as *what happened?* and *what's been happening*), transitive clauses show an SVO order and sentences with unaccusative verbs show a VS order (Gutiérrez Bravo 2002).

### 1.2 Word order

When the focus falls on the whole sentence (all-focus) the word order is:

VS (sentences with unaccusative verbs)

SV (i. sentences with inergative verbs)

SVO ii. sentences with transitive verbs)

But when the focus fall on the subject the order is:

SV (sentences with unaccusative verbs)

VS (sentences with inergative verbs)

VSO, VOS (sentences with transitive verbs)

I will report on the spontaneous production of 8 monolingual Mexican children (UAMI corpus). This longitudinal study was carried on at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana day care center #2. At the beginning of the study children were between 1.11 and 2.1, and between 3.7 and 3.10 at the end of the study. Children were recorded once a week from 8 to 12:30.

The utterances recorded in this study show that children produced all the orders registered in adult Spanish:

SV, VS with unaccusative verbs

SVO, VSO, VOS with transitive verbs

I have analyzed all utterances in the context they were produced. In this presentation, I intend to explain this apparently error-free behavior which contrasts with problems in the acquisition of IS in other languages.

## 2. Unaccusative verbs

**2.1 VS order** First verbs used by all children in this study are unaccusatives (without subjects)<sup>•</sup>

(se) cayó (fell)

(se) acabó (it's finished)

(se) rompió (broke)

cabe (it fits)

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<sup>•</sup> Confirmed in questionnaire to parents.

Almost all intransitive verbs with an NP subject recorded in this longitudinal study are unaccusatives. In sentences like those shown in (1); all of them were uttered to announce an event that was taking or had just taken place.

The NP subject surfaces post verbally as in adult Spanish all-focus sentences with unaccusative verbs (**verb is underlined**):

- (1) a. *Ya viene el perro* (E. 2.3.27)  
is coming the dog
- b. *se fue la luz* (F. 2.41)  
went out the light
- c. *se cae Arturo* (D.A. 2,3,9)  
falls Arturo
- d. *no vino Tonatzin* (M. 2.2.21)  
no came Tonatzin
- e. *ya se murió la araña* (Ed. 2.3.27)  
died the spider
- f. *ya se va Pedro* (E. 2.4.4)  
leaves Pedro
- g. *ya llegó el agua* (M. 2.5.5)  
arrived the water
- h. *se cayó el tractor* (F. 2.2.18)  
fell the tractor
- i. *cuidado, si no va a salir sangre* (T. 2,6,8)  
careful, if not will come out blood
- j. *sale sangre* (A. 2,9,16)  
comes out blood
- k. *me salió sangre* (S. 2,8,7)  
me came out blood

Contrary to what is observed in (1), in sentences, as those shown in (2), the subject surfaces before the unaccusative verb (**verb underlined**).

## 2.2 SV order

- (2) a. *Marita no vino* (T. 2,3,29)  
Marita not came
- b. *Dani no vino* (Dal. 2.4.7)  
Dani not came
- c. *Fernando se cayó así* (E. 2,3,17)  
Fernando fell like this
- d. *ese tronco se movió* (F. 2.3.9)  
that tree trunk moved
- e. *mi mamá se cayó de la cama* (F. 2.4.8)  
my mother fell off the bed
- f. *mi mamá se fue* (M. 2,6,11)  
my mother left

The context in which these utterances were produced shows that they do not answer a “what happens” type of question, like in adult Spanish, the subject surfaces pre verbally.

The utterances presented in (1-2) might suggest that children have acquired the mechanism to assign focus to the whole sentence (shown by VS production) or narrow focus to subjects in sentences with unaccusative verbs (shown by SV production).

## Focus defined

Foci have been defined in many ways but definitions are

usually centered on the distinction between old and new information, between shared and non-shared information. Studies in “theory of mind” support Schaeffer’s (2000) assertion that children’s pragmatic system is underdeveloped in that they cannot always distinguish shared and non-shared information.

This, she argues, explains non-adult-like object scrambling in Dutch children.

Other problems in the acquisition of Information Structure have been observed in different languages (for example the overextension of subject omission in child Russian).

Consequently, researchers of acquisition of Spanish are bound to explain the seemingly error-free behavior of children shown in (1-2).

### Hypothesis

Most of the early utterances are like (1): VS (unaccusatives)

They are produced to comment on an event, usually a situation that has attracted their attention.

I argue that children do not make mistakes because the message is transparent, VS/SV orders are clearly differentiated:

- i. when one talks about situations, as shown by utterances in (1), the order in the language they are learning **VS**.
- ii. When one does not talk about a situation but about an object or a person (like in (2)), the order is **SV**.

Focus in Spanish, is assigned to subjects of unaccusative verbs in the pre verbal position, but as I have accepted that the notion of focus defined in terms of shared non-shared information is beyond the cognitive development of three year old children, I’ll argue that it is not focus but topic what drives the placement of the subject in preverbal position.

### Topic

RRG approach to information structures builds upon Lambrecht’s (1986 87, 94, 2000) (cf. Van Valin 2005:68).

The topic referent is *active* or *accessible* in the discourse, but there is a fundamental relationship between the element functioning as topic and the propositions in an utterance which the speaker assumes the hearer knows or believes (Lambrecht 1986:102, cf. Van Valin 2005:69).

As I have assumed, that as a rule, children under four do not take into consideration what the hearer knows or believes, I propose that at this age, the topic is “what a sentence is about” (Erteschik-Shir 2007:19).

The analysis of the context in which sentences in (2), (presented again as (2-bis)), demonstrates that all subjects in (2a-d), comply with this definition.

(2-bis)

- a. *Marita no vino* (T. 2,3,29)  
Marita not came
- b. *Dani no vino* (Dal. 2.4.7)  
Dani not came
- c. *Fernando se cayó así* (E. 2,3,17)  
Fernando fell like this

- d. *Ese tronco se movió* (F. 2.3.9)  
That tree trunk moved
- e. *Mi mamá se cayó de la cama* (F. 2.4.8)  
My mother fell off the bed
- f. *mi mamá se fue* (M. 2,6,11)  
My mother left

It is generally agreed on that for the hearer to accept a referent as a topic, it must have been mentioned in the immediate discourse. The subjects of (2a-b) are typical topics, they have been mentioned before.

But not all topics require previous mention. A sentence like *that trunk moved* (2-d) can be uttered out of the clear blue sky because there is a tree trunk on the scene which E is pointing at, so it is a topic (*cf.* Erteschik-Shir 2007:20).

The subject in *Fernando fell like this* (2c) can also function as a temporarily available topic because Fernando just fell so the hearer must have the referent in mind.

Subjects in sentences produced out of the clear blue sky can also be considered topics if they are permanent features of the world, like “the president”. “the moon” (Erteschik-Shir 2007:18)

I argue that this is the case of (e-f). “*my mother*” can be considered as a member of the permanent fixtures of the child’s world.

As topic in Spanish occurs at the beginning of a sentence, a very clear contrast is established between:

- i. SV order used to talk about the subject

- ii. and the early VS order children employ to talk about situations.

### Rule

- i. Mexican children, like Dutch and Russian children cannot distinguish shared and non-shared information.
- ii. However, Spanish speaking children do not make mistakes
- iii. The reason is **they can draw a very simple rule:** the NP that refers to the entity they are talking about is placed at the beginning of the sentence but if they are talking about an event, the subject cannot be placed in that position.
- iv. All their utterances produced are grammatical, they simply do not mean what we might think they mean.

### VSO, VOS, cliticVS

To further validate my hypothesis that in the stage of acquisition being analyzed in this presentation subjects in preverbal position are topics, I will present VSO, VOS and clitic VS sentences registered in the UAMI corpus.

I argue that sentences in (3-4) support my claim that children have discovered that the preverbal position has to be occupied by the topicalized subject.

### (3) VSO

- a. *no me compró mi mamá una panterita* A. 3.2.5  
not me bought my mother a little panther
- b. *me compró mi mamá un vestido lindo* M. 2.11.16  
me bought my mother a dress pretty
- c. *me ponió mi mamá crema* A. 3.9.14  
me put my mother cream + diminutive

- d. *le quitó tu hija la pistola* A. 2.10.28  
her took away your daughter the gun
- e. *así hace el conejo la nariz* E. 2,3,27  
like this does (moves) the rabbit the nose

In all these utterances, the subject is not the most important issue for the child, so it is not placed in preverbal position.

The context shows that in:

i. (3a-b) Children are talking about presents they received. A&B are not talking about their mothers, they are talking about what they did or did not get.

(3c) A. burned her hand and is asked if it hurts. She is fine, cream was applied to her hand.

(3d) The problem A is reporting is caused by a gun that was taken away from its owner by “your daughter”. The English translation shows clearly that the agent is not the topic.

(3e) E points at his nose; “así” (like this) placed before the verb shows he is talking about the way the rabbit moves his nose not about the rabbit.

## VOS

VOS sentences are not very frequent in Spanish and those presented in studies about word order in Spanish sound awkward unless a very specific context justifies them (cf. Gutiérrez Bravo 2002, 2005). However all sentences in (4) are grammatical.

- (4) a. *ya me cortó la uña mi mamá* M. 2.10.9  
already me cut the nail my mother
- b. *me cortó mi pelo mi papá* M. 3.0.10  
me cut my hair my father
- c. *a mí, me cortó el pelo la señora* S. 2.10.3

- me, me cut the hair the lady
- d. *me quitó mi papel mi maestra* Ed. 2.4.2  
me took away my paper the teacher
- e. *tiene tierra mi zapato* Dal. 2.5.17  
has sand my shoe

Children are talking about having had their hair or finger nails cut not about who did it. I suggest that as *hair* and *nails* (3a-c) rank high in the probability of being selected by *cut*, VO surface as one unit and the subject surfaces after it.

The phrase in (4d) was uttered when E was asked why he was not working. He cannot not work because “the paper was taken away from him”; this is what he is talking about, *the teacher* surfaces after VO.

(4e) can be explained in the same way. Dal is talking about something she just found out: there is sand in her shoe, “the sand in her shoe” is what was bothering her.

## Clitics VS

All sentences in (5) have at least one clitic and in all of them the subject is placed after the verb because it is not the topic of the utterance:

- (5) a. *mira, lo hizo Karen* (T. 2.2)  
look it made Karen
- b. *le pegó Marta* (S. 2.4.2)  
him hit Marta
- c. *me lo cortaron* (E. 2.4.4)  
me it they cut
- d. *me mordió Zaira* (E. 2.4.11)

- me bit Zaira  
 e. *me lo regaló el doctor* (M. 2.6.18)  
 me it gave the doctor  
 f. *ya la tiró mi maestra* (T. 2.6.29)  
 already it threw away my teacher  
 g. *me los limpió la maestra* (T. 2.6.29)  
 me them cleaned the teacher  
 h. *para que no me lo robe mi maestra* (2.8.7)  
 so that not me it steal the teacher

In (5a, f,) T is talking about the object represented by the clitic: in b, d, children are telling why somebody is crying, they are not talking about who made hem cry.

All the utterances with chains of clitics, the third person clitic *lo* (*it*) refers to the object of the question:

- c. what happened to your hair?  
 e. where did you get that lollipop:  
 g. what happened to your moustache?  
 h. why are you hiding your money?

Once again, the subject not being what they are talking about is not placed preverbally.

### SVO

In Spanish:

- i. the subject surfaces before the verb in all-focus sentences with transitive verbs,
- ii. topic surfaces in the beginning of the sentence
- iii. That is, both all-focus sentences and sentences with topicalized subject show an SVO order.

As all SVO utterances registered in the UAMI corpus were

produced at a later stage than SV sentences (with unaccusatives) shown in (2): (2.3.9-2.6.11 vs. (2.9.2-3.7) we must consider the possibility that children are starting to be aware of the fact that in adult language in SVO sentences, the subject may surface before the verb when focus is assigned to the whole sentence.

Our next step is then to investigate if the subjects of all sentences in (6) qualify as topics or as focus.

### (6)

- a. *esta Ariana me prestó su agua* (M. 3,6,1)  
 this Ariana lent me her water  
 b. *este popote tiene grande el agujero* (F. 3,2,4)  
 this straw has a big hole  
 c. *mi mamá está haciendo la comida para comer con una cucharita* E.2.9.2  
 my mother is cookin the meal to eat with a spoon  
 d. *mi mama me va a comprar una calabaza grande y una chiquita* M. 3,6,16  
 my mother me goes to buy a pumpkin big and one small  
 e. *mi mama me compró un coche que funciona* 3.6.29  
 my mother me brought a car that functions  
 f. *las enfermeras me dieron mi paleta* M. 2,9,12  
 the nurses me gave my lollipop  
 g. *mi abuelita me hace un sweater de borrego* S. 3.1  
 my grandmother me makes a sweater of lamb (wool)  
 h. *mi tía me tejió un sweater* A. 3.7  
 my aunt me knitted a sweater

The subjects in (6a-b) qualify as topics because both *Adriana* and *straw* are on the scene of the conversation and the speakers point at them.

The subject of (6c,d,e) (*my mother*) can be considered like “my mother” in (2e-f) as permanent topics.

The status of subjects as topics in (6f,g,h) is harder to sustain because they have not been mentioned before and we cannot assert that they are temporarily or permanent topic.

I have rejected that children could assign focus because following Scaheffer (2000) I do not accept that they can always distinguish shared and non-shared information.

However, a pragmatically derived definition of focus states that “the focal information in a linguistic expression is that information which is relatively the most important or salient in the given communicative setting, and considered by the speaker to be the most essential ... (Dik 1997:326 *cf.* Erteschik-Shir 2007:38).

This definition is along the same lines as what has been argued in this presentation: children know what they are talking about,

My hypothesis is that sentences like (6 f,g,h) suggest that children are using SVO order when the most important or salient information they are communicating is not expressed by one single syntactic constituent but by the whole sentence. That is, they are learning that in Spanish all-focus sentences require SVO order.

## Final remarks

I have claimed that children do not make order mistakes in the early stages of the acquisition of Spanish because they get a transparent message, VS/SV orders are clearly differentiated and they can draw very simple rules.

VS order is used to talk about situations.

SV order is used when speakers are not talking about a situation but about an object or a person.

Consequently, what they are talking about (the topic) goes before the verb.

To further validate this claim I presented VSO, VOS, cliticVS utterances to show that when children are not talking about the subject they place it postverbally.

SVO sentences are not usually produced at the very early stages. There are sentences in which the subject does not seem to be the topic. I claim that these sentences suggest that children have grasped that this order is used not only to topicalize subjects, but also when the most important information is expressed by the whole sentence.

We have not considered inergatives in this presentation because our corpus only contained one SV/VS example. However, these sentences do not contradict what has been presented here. At the age of 2;3.27 one child produced *están llorando los bebés* (the babies are crying) when he was asked what was going on, but he placed the subject before the verb when he

talked about Marita; he uttered the sentence *Marita también lloraba* (Marita was also crying).

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