

Abstract: A contact phenomenon at the syntax-pragmatics interface:
Word order in bilingual Spanish

The current study looks at a phenomenon related to language change, as motivated by language contact. Subjects include second and third generation bilingual speakers of English and Spanish who were born in the United States, and whose dialect of origin is Mexican. A control group of monolingual speakers of Spanish from Mexico has also been included as part of the study. The speech of the bilinguals has been analyzed in order to determine whether or not unexpected subject-verb word order is found for the unaccusative verb class. The study has shown that the unexpected order can be attributed to a loss of sensitivity of pragmatic constraints in one language (Spanish) due to contact with the dominant language (English).

Intransitive verbs that are classified as unaccusative are said to have a surface structure representation that matches the deep structure representation. Unaccusatives select an internal theme or patient argument whose base-generated position is inside the verb phrase (as sister of V). According to the Unaccusative Hypothesis, the unaccusative classification is based on the subject's status as an underlying object of the verb (Perlmutter 1978). In Spanish, unaccusatives show a discourse neutral word order of VS. Unaccusatives also appear with an SV order when such a change in order is motivated by discourse factors comprising the information structure.

Discourse factors are the other half of the equation (aside from lexical class) responsible for determining word order in Spanish. The study of information structure allows us to analyze the interaction between sentences and their context, where propositions are said to be structured according to the two main categories that make up information structure: presupposition and assertion. This basically has to do with what the speaker considers to be old vs. new information for the interlocutor.

Syntactic constituents and how they are ordered are among the ways in which information structure is manifested, as is prosody. Intonation is an especially important indicator in the case of English where resources to mark focus relationships are otherwise limited. In contrast, flexibility with regards to word order is the primary resource available and used in Spanish in order to contrast the new vs. old information relationship.

Applying the above ideas to the data yields interesting results. The unexpected/unmotivated SV order of unaccusatives was found 25% of the time in four of ten bilingual speakers interviewed during the pilot study. The data also give evidence of variation: no speaker produces only the SV order (i.e., speakers are aware of flexible word order in Spanish).

The conclusion is that the higher instantiation of SV order for unaccusatives can be attributed to indirect transfer, (Mougeon & Beniak, 1991; Silva-Corvalán, 1994): the SV order for these verbs already exists in Spanish and its use is simply being extended to more environments. This study is compatible with findings of other contact linguistics studies where contact is observed as extending an already present phenomenon in the language in question (Otheguy & Zentella, 2001).

What the interface between syntax and discourse pragmatics points to in this study of languages in contact is that bilinguals do not experience "loss" with regards to knowledge of verb class and order distinction. Rather, what changes is *sensitivity* to discourse-pragmatic factors, a change observed at the level of information structure and packaging.

References

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