

¿El verbo va primero OR Primero va el sujeto?: Subject-Verb order in Latin American Spanish

Spanish systematically constrains word order variation of subject and verb. Subject Verb (SV) and Verb Subject (VS) constructions are accepted by speakers and are produced regularly in spontaneous speech by Spanish speakers. For example,

- (1) a. Catalina cantó. (SV)
Catalina sing-3SG.PST
'Catalina sang.'
- b. Cantó Catalina. (VS)
sing-3SG.PST Catalina
'Catalina sang.'

This paper studies the restrictions on subject-verb placement for *unaccusative*¹ and *unergative*² verbs. I focus on the syntactic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic factors predicting subject-verb placement. I aim to answer three questions: (1) Does the unergative/unaccusative divide influence SV/VS order acceptability³?, (2) What are the dialectal differences, if any, on subject placement acceptability in Spanish?, and (3) Does sentence context affect subject placement preference⁴?

I collected data from sixty-nine Spanish speakers from the Caribbean, Chile, and Mexico. These speakers provided 1656 acceptability ratings on sentences with different subject-verb orders. Participants rated the acceptability of intransitive verbs in three contextualized pragmatic conditions: (i) no presupposition –wide-focus (WF)–, (ii) subject is the only information not presupposed –subject-narrow focus (SNF)–, and (iii) subject is the only presupposed information –subject-old-information (SOI)–.

My most exciting result comes from the interaction of verb type and pragmatic conditions. Table 2 shows examples of what these interactions would look like. The examples, although shortened, come from the experiment itself. When information structure puts pressure on the argument structure preferences, we see some changes in the SV order preferability of unergatives. I show this in Figure 1, where I depict SV and VS preferability ratings for different pragmatic conditions. The two left panels show that verb-type switches the order participants prefer in the *wide-focus* context. I replicate this finding in Table 1, where I regress the preferability ratings on verb-type, pragmatic condition, and their interactions. The 0.59 coefficient of the interaction between unaccusative verb-type and WF pragmatic condition is statistically significant.

My findings show that verb type and pragmatic conditions predict word preferability. All the pragmatic conditions I surveyed were significant predictors. This contrasts with Ortiz Lopez (2009) who found no significant effects of any of these factors and that speakers preferred SV order with both verb types. Moreover, my findings support the Unaccusative Hypothesis because VS order is preferred when the verb is unaccusative (Perlmutter and Postal, 1974). It should be noted, however, that SV is still the preferred Spanish order. Corr (2012) mentions that the systematic observation observed in her data should be explained by semantic differences in the verbs and the effects of PP structure. However, the data in the current study seem to point to both argument structure and information structure working together to condition acceptability to both SV and VS word order. While, overall, SV order appears to be the unmarked word order in Spanish, this doesn't mean that VS order is undesirable. The data shows that both syntactic and pragmatic factors constrain the preferability of these word orders.

The primary objectives of this study were to determine whether the type of intransitive verb and information structure influenced SV/VS word order acceptability and whether there were any dialectal differences in these preferences. Whilst no regional differences were found for VS order, the linguistic factors proved to be illuminating. Although, as expected, SV order was found to be preferred over all, the question remained as to what factors influenced favorable ratings for VS order. The present study is the first to investigate the current combination of predictor variables while also controlling for subject properties, clause type, and subject size. I found that of the predictors examined, verb type and pragmatic condition seem to work together to condition word order acceptability. This study adds to the literature by establishing the connection between argument structure and information structure and asserting that the Unaccusative Hypothesis is indeed borne out in the data.

[1] I. Bosque and J. Gutiérrez-Rexach. *Fundamentos de sintaxis formal*. Ediciones Akal, 2009. [2] A. Corr. "Subject inversion in Ibero-Romance". In: *Unpublished MPhil dissertation: Cambridge* (2012). [3] A. Corr. "Wide-focus subject-verb inversion in Ibero-Romance: A locative account". In: *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 1.1 (2016). [4] M. Lobo and A. M. Martins. "Manual of Romance morphosyntax and syntax". eng. In: *Manuals of romance linguistics; Volume 17*. Berlin, [Germany]; Boston, [Massachusetts]: De Gruyter, 2017. Chap. Subjects. [5] L. A. Ortiz López. "El español del Caribe: orden de palabras a la luz de la interfaz léxico-sintáctica y sintáctico-pragmática". In: *Revista internacional de lingüística iberoamericana : RILI* 7.2 (14) (2009). [6] D. Perlmutter and P. Postal. "Lectures on relational grammar". In: *Linguistic Society of America Summer Institute, University of Massachusetts, Amherst* (1974).

¹Unaccusative verbs are those whose subject is the undergoer of the action.

²Unergative verbs are those whose subject is the doer of the action.

³Acceptability refers to whether an utterance is accepted at all by the speakers.

⁴Preference refers to whether one order is preferred over another when different predictor variables are taken into account.

Figures, Statistical Analysis Table, and Examples

Table 1: Interaction between Verb Type and Pragmatic Conditions in VS Word Order Rating

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Intercept	3.16	0.087	36.41	<0.001
Verb Type: Unaccusative	1.05	0.123	8.56	<0.001
Pragmatic Condition: Wide-Focus	0.04	0.123	0.35	0.723
Pragmatic Condition: Subject Old Information	-0.83	0.123	-6.73	<0.001
Verb Type: Unaccusative Pragmatic Condition: WF	0.59	0.174	3.38	<0.001
Verb Type: Unaccusative Pragmatic Condition: SOI	0.80	0.174	4.64	<0.001

Figure 1: Word Order Ratings for Verb Types by Pragmatic Conditions

Table 2: Examples of the Pragmatic Conditions

Pragmatic Condition	Context	SV	VS	Translation
Unergatives				
WF	Jorge pregunta: '¿Catalina, que pasó?' Catalina contesta:	Valentina bostezó.	Bostezó Valentina.	Jorge asks: 'What happened?' Catherine replies: 'Valentina yawned.'
SNF	Paula le pregunta a Elsa: '¿Quién se sonrió primero?' Elsa contesta:	Victor se ríe.	Se ríe Victor.	Paula asks Elsa: 'Who smiled first?' Elsa replies: 'Victor laughed.'
SOI	Isabela le pregunta a Olivia: '¿Qué hizo Camila hoy?' Olivia:	Camila patinó todo el día.	Patinó Camila todo el día.	Isabela asks Olivia: 'What did Camila do today?' Olivia: 'Camila skated all day.'
Unaccusatives				
WF	Emilio pregunta: '¿Ah? ¿Qué pasó?' Franchesca:	Una planta creció en el carro.	Creció una planta en el carro.	Emilio asks: 'Oh? What happened?' Franchesca: 'A plant grew in the car.'
SNF	La maestra pregunta: '¿Quién desapareció?' Anastasia contesta:	Florencia desapareció.	Desapareció Florencia.	The teacher asks: 'Who disappeared?' Anastasia replies: 'Florence disappeared.'
SOI	Luna pregunta: '¿Qué pasa con el agua?' Cristina contesta:	El agua está hirviendo.	Está hirviendo el agua.	Luna asks: 'What is wrong with the water?' Cristina replies: 'The water is boiling.'