Consequences of different inputs on the acquisition of word orders in L2 Spanish

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ABSTRACT

This article distinguishes two classes of learners according to the pedagogical methodology employed: the first focuses on the development of metalinguistic knowledge of rules and language through conscious learning; the second involves a naturalistic approach based upon communicative activities. This article, based on different word orders of Spanish, sets out to discover whether the environmental data determine access to the properties of the new target language. The subjects are ab initio learners (n=28) of Spanish at the University of Plymouth and learners (n=20) from the Instituto Cervantes, Manchester. Both groups of learners were exposed to the target language for the same amount of time and asked to interpret 32 Spanish sentences with different word orders. The results show that there are clear differences between native and both groups of non-native speakers in terms of the perception of the syntactical and pragmactical properties of the different word orders in Spanish.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will look at the implications of both the input and the Universal Grammar (UG) (Braidi 1999) in Second Language Acquisition. In particular, we explore issues regarding the acquisition of different word orders by different L2 learners of Spanish. Three scenarios have been put forward to explain the role of UG in L2 acquisition: L2 learners have direct access to UG since they start from scratch (Braidi 1999); L2 learners have indirect access to UG since they start from their L1 value (Braidi 1999); and finally, L2 learners have no access at all to UG and therefore may make use of problem-solving strategies (ibid.).
In view of the above, this paper aims to investigate:

- the similarities and differences between native and non-native speakers' competence (parameter resetting)
- the differences between two groups of learners who have been in two different learning settings. One group was exposed to formal instruction in Spanish grammar; the other received communicative instruction during which no attention was paid to the formal grammar of the target language. We would like to suggest that if UG is still available to both groups then we will not expect to find any difference in parameter resetting in spite of them having received different input.

1.1. Word order in English and Spanish: SVO, SOV, OVS, OSV, VSO, VOS

In this section we consider the main differences between English and Spanish regarding the order of Subject, Verb and Object. We also consider the relation between syntax and pragmatics which determines the different word orders in Spanish.

Although English and Spanish have the same head-initial parameter, the two languages differ in subject, verb and object movement: English has a canonical fixed order SVO, whereas Spanish also allows SOV, VSO, OVS and OSV. Furthermore, different word orders in Spanish may signify two different ways of processing the information: new information versus given information (Contreras 1976). For example, emphasis can be placed on the sentence-initial (left-dislocation) or on the sentence-final position (right-dislocation). In this article we will focus on the topicalization process.

Following the Principles and Parameters theory, we assume that the subject of the sentence is introduced as the specifier of VP in the declarative sentences in determined contexts (Koopman and Sportiche 1991). We know that English has the canonical order SVO in declarative sentences. For instance:

(1) El tren chocó contra el autobús
    'The train crashed into the bus'

has the following D-structure:
In the S-structure, the subject ‘the train’ occupies the specifier of AGrP, an order which is compulsory in English. Following Roberts (1997) English does not permit object movement; so, only by topicalization and under very special circumstances can the prepositional object ‘into the bus’ occupy the CP position:

(3) into the bus, the train crashed.

The basic structure as (2) would also represent the SVO order in Spanish. Taking this into consideration, we can claim that Spanish also allows the free inversion of the subject to the right of the verb (this was seen as one of the aspects involved in the pro-drop parameter). That is,

(4) (a) El tren chocó contra el autobús  SVO
‘The train crashed into the bus’
(b) Chocó el tren contra el autobús  VSO
‘Crashed the train into the bus’

(4a-b) are possible orders in Spanish but not in English, since English does not allow the verb to move to the front of the sentence as shown in (5):

(5) *Crashed the train into the bus
    ‘The train crashed into the bus’
Another possible word order in Spanish grammar is OSV where the object moves to the specifier of CP as shown in (6a-b):

(6) (a) Contra el autobús el tren chocó
Into the bus the train crashed
'The bus crashed into the train'

(b) *A Rodolfo Carmen golpeó
To Rodolfo Carmen beat
'Carmen beat Rodolfo'

The order in (6b) is ungrammatical in Spanish, unless a clitic lo is used as (6c). Campos and Zampini (1990) argue that there is no movement at all since the focus in both sentences appears in the CP position.

(6) (c)

In (6d) the DO is in the front of the sentence and constitutes new information since it does not occupy its normal position. In this regard, we must recall that Spanish marks the object noun phrase with the preposition a since the direct object is equally capable of being either the agent or the patient represented by the verb as in (6d):

(6d) A Rodolfo Carmen lo golpeó
Rodolfo Carmen lo-clitic beat
'Carmen beat Rodolfo'
In (6c) the direct object is marked, but the subject 'Carmen' is unmarked. The object of a transitive verb can also appear in different positions: in (7), for example, the object has been topicalised (Zubizarreta 1992):

(7) Topicalised Object+Verb+Subject

So far we can claim that there is a position for the subject inside the VP (Koopman and Sportiche 1991) where the head of the VP is a finite verb as seen in previous examples. Different elements of the sentence can be focussed, e.g., Subject, DO, PP. The subject of the sentence can appear in different positions: either in its canonical position or inverted. Hence, we claim that the unmarked order in Spanish is SVO, whereas the marked orders are SOV, OVS, OSV, VOS since there is a topicalization of one element. In the latter, the subject, the object or the verb can be topicalised. The VSO is marked in the declarative sentence, but unmarked in questions.
1.2. Conclusions

Subject, verb and object movements are indeed parameter variation between English and Spanish grammar. To all intents, English and Spanish have the same D-structure, although we claim that the properties of agreement in AgrP are related to the movement parameter. Under this parameter, all tensed verbs in Spanish are raised into the INFL position in which verbs are marked for tense and aspect. Since English has a weak AgrP it is impossible to move the subject. Spanish, however, has a strong AgrP which does permit verb movement and still enables a theta-role to be assigned to its complements. The question which arises in second language acquisition is whether L2 learners of Spanish have access to the different word orders because the UG is still available to them. That is, if UG is still available it is due to the fact that L2 learners have determined the grammatical role (i.e. agent or subject and patient or object roles). In the next section we describe two different inputs within a foreign language context bearing in mind these properties of the target language which L2 learners of Spanish may be exposed to.

2. L2 INPUT: COMMUNICATIVE VERSUS STRUCTURAL TEACHING

Let us begin by describing in some detail these two learning settings. In traditional grammar lessons, L2 learners approach the target language by means of a detailed analysis of its grammar followed by specific translation tasks from or into the target language. Language learning can therefore be viewed as a process characterized by memorising rules or formulas in order to understand the morphology, syntax, lexicon and semantics of the new language. In addition, the language used by the instructors when addressing the learners is not the target language. That is, traditional grammar lessons are input-poor, the target language is accommodated to the curriculum and used mechanically by the learners.

By contrast, in the communicative classroom, L2 learners focus on meaning without paying attention to - or having a perfect control of - the formal rules. They attend to the properties of the target language in specific activities during which they practise what they have learnt. During these activities, L2 learners discover the grammatical features of the target language while the language used by the instructors is often the target language. This situation creates what we can call an input-rich environment, L2 learners using the target language in real and meaningful situations.

In a traditional learning setting, we would expect L2 learners to have either indirect access to the target language should they rely on their L1 value or no access at all making use instead of problem solving strategies. In a communica-
tive learning setting we would expect the learners to have direct access since they rely on the target language.

3. OUR STUDY

3.1. Subjects
The subjects were 48 English native speakers - aged between 20 and 35 - who were unaware of the nature of the study. Of a total of 48 subjects, 28 received traditional instruction in Spanish at the University of Plymouth, and the remainder were exposed to communicative teaching in the Instituto Cervantes.

Four native speakers of Spanish also took part in the study.

3.2. Task
A preference grammaticality task was used in the study. This was designed to measure the L2 learners' knowledge of word order in Spanish. Learners were asked to judge 24 Spanish sentences and 8 distractors. 4 sentences were of the order subject-verb-object, 4 of subject-object-verb, 4 of object-verb-subject, 4 of object-subject-verb, 4 of verb-subject-object and 4 of verb-object-subject. The task had a time limit (20') constraining the time learners could spend reflecting on the construction of the sentences. Since the word order in Spanish is optional, we also asked the learners to correct the items which they considered ungrammatical.

We opted for this type of task because we wished to compare the competence of both groups in Spanish constructions. These constructions are otherwise difficult to elicit, e.g., in oral production.

3.3. Results
The scores were converted into percentages in order to compare the subjects' results. The native speakers' score and cue-processing of the test were used to establish baseline data. The results can be summarised in the following tables.

Table 1. Percentages of acceptability of SVO order.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SVO-acc</th>
<th>SVO-unace</th>
<th>SVO-uncer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NNS1 (28)</td>
<td>95.54</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS2 (20)</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS (4)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* NNS1 = non-native speakers of a traditional setting; NNS2 = non-native speakers of a communicative setting; NS = native speakers; SVO-acc = SVO order acceptable; SVO-unace = SVO order unacceptable; SVO-uncer = SVO order uncertain.
Both native and non-native speakers clearly opt for the SVO order regardless of whether the verb is transitive or intransitive. Surprisingly, the NNS2 consider as unacceptable the SVO with the intransitive verb and correct the sentence as shown in (8), in which the order is VSO:

(8) Chocó el tren contra el autobús
Crashed the train into the bus
‘The train crashed into the bus’

Furthermore, in the cases with the transitive verb both NNS1 and NNS2 consider both items unacceptable because of the presence of the preposition a, and they produce an ungrammatical structure as (9), one which corresponds to English:

(9) Marva golpeó Pedro
Marva beat Pedro
‘Marva beat Pedro’

This is clearly a case of transfer. The subject of a finite clause and the object of a transitive verb are case marked in English and other languages. That is to say, in English both nominative and accusative are structural Cases. By contrast, Spanish and other similar languages contain facts which question whether the accusative is a structural Case (Torrego 1999); this is held only in cases of object marked accusatives. Sometimes the objects are Case marked in Spanish; this marker is a which is the same for the dative preposition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SOV-acc</th>
<th>SOV-unacc</th>
<th>SOV-uncer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NNS1 (28)</td>
<td>5.35</td>
<td>94.65</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS2 (20)</td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>73.75</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS (4)</td>
<td>31.25</td>
<td>68.75</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SOV-acc = SOV order acceptable; SOV-unacc = SOV order unacceptable; SOV-uncer = SOV order uncertain.

The native speakers accept SOV order for the ergative verbs where emphasis is placed on the subject. The subject appears in capital letters in order to be read as focus:

(10) EL COCHE contra el autobús chocó
THE CAR into the bus crashed
‘The car crashed into the bus’
They consider this order unacceptable and change it to SVO when judging items containing a transitive verb. However, the non-native speakers who do not accept this order provide another structure similar to the canonical SVO order.

Table 3. Percentages of acceptability of OVS order.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OVS-acc</th>
<th>OVS-unacc</th>
<th>OVS-uncer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NNS1 (28)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS2 (20)</td>
<td>41.25</td>
<td>53.75</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS (4)</td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>68.75</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* OVS-acc = OVS order acceptable; OVS-unacc = OVS order unacceptable; OVS-uncer = OVS order uncertain.

The native speakers do not accept OVS order in 68.75% of the cases, and they replace the sentence using a clitic as shown in (11):

(11) A la hija LA golpeó
     To the daughter la-clitic pro beat
     ‘He/she beat the daughter’

When judging those items in which PP goes to the front, the native speakers prefer the OVS order in 18.75% of the cases.

In the case of the non-native speakers, half of them accept the proposed order in which DO [+human] goes in front and the structure which they propose is the one in which the preposition a is missing. Non-native speakers do not correct the sentence by placing the clitic as native speakers did; rather they change it for the strict English order SVO.

Table 4. Percentages of acceptability of OSV order.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OSV-acc</th>
<th>OSV-unacc</th>
<th>OSV-uncer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NNS1 (28)</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>81.25</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS2 (20)</td>
<td>33.75</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS (4)</td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* OSV-acc = OSV order acceptable; OSV-unacc = OSV order unacceptable; OSV-uncer = OSV order uncertain.

Native speakers do not accept the OSV order in 75% of the cases. When native speakers accept the OSV order (18.75%) it is in those cases when the presence of the PP in front of the sentence is with the intransitive verbs.
In the case of the non-native speakers, the majority of them reject the OSV order due to the presence of the preposition a and replace it for an ungrammatical structure. As we claimed earlier, this is due to transfer from their mother tongue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VSO-acc</th>
<th>VSO-unacc</th>
<th>VSO-uncer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NNS1 (28)</td>
<td>44.04</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS2 (20)</td>
<td>51.67</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS (4)</td>
<td>41.60</td>
<td>58.40</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*VSO-acc = VSO order acceptable; VSO-unacc = VSO order unacceptable; VSO-uncer = VSO order uncertain.

It is clear that native speakers do not accept this order, unless there is an emphasis. Consequently, the native speaker’s tendency is to replace the sentence for the one shown in (12) in which the verb appears in capital letters in order to be read as focus:

(12) CHOCO el carro contra el puente
     CRASHED the cart into the bridge
     ‘The cart crashed into the bridge’

The verb CHOCO ‘CRASHED’ has a contrastive and emphatic value. However, that is not the case for non-native speakers who are not capable of detecting the emphasis on the verb and replace it for the canonical order of English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VOS-acc</th>
<th>VOS-unacc</th>
<th>VOS-uncer</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NNS1 (28)</td>
<td>13.58</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>6.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS2 (20)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS (4)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*VOS-acc = VOS order acceptable; VOS-unacc = VOS order unacceptable; VOS-uncer = VOS order uncertain.

In judging these items in which the verb occupies the front position, the native speakers do not accept VOS order in 70% of the cases and they change it to VSO regardless of whether the verb is intransitive or transitive.
After examining these results, we are in a position to claim that non-native speakers of both settings make the same corrections using the same word order: Subj-Verb-Obj/PP. Furthermore, we argue that there is clear difference between the native speakers' cue-processing and the non-native speakers' cue-processing when judging the different word orders presented in this task.

4. DISCUSSION

Even though English and Spanish possess different word orders, L2 learners of Spanish relied on their first language when interpreting the Spanish sentences. This study shows that L2 learners have a strong tendency to opt for the canonical order of English. At this stage of their acquisition process, we claim that L2 learners of Spanish have access only to the universal lexical categories such as nouns and verbs, but not to the functional categories of Universal Grammar. Universal Grammar accounts for the abstract grammatical categories which can be assigned to those lexical categories. Furthermore, it seems that both groups of learners analysed word order in Spanish word by word, not taking into consideration other pragmatic principles such as topic and focus.

In the light of these linguistic insights, the results allow us to claim that non-native speakers do not possess the same cue-processing as native speakers with which to determine the correct word order. For example, native speakers opt for the transformation of sentences using a clitic. Furthermore, they generally refuse the order in which the subject is placed in the final position of the sentence. We claim that L2 learners utilise cue-processing that does not match the language input they have been exposed to, whereas in sentence interpretation native speakers of Spanish rely on subject-verb agreement to detect the right word order. English native speakers do not abandon their strict word-order strategy in learning Spanish, a language which exhibits a flexible word order. Unlike non-native speakers, native speakers also rely on animacy and case-marking (that is, the use of the preposition a for direct object) when subject-verb agreement is not available as a cue.

Regardless of their teaching exposure, the learners achieve the same ability to judge the items in the task. That is, L2 learners do not develop a linguistic ability that could provide access to the targeted linguistic features due to the existence of UG. Traditional and communicative teaching methods do not provide L2 learners with the necessary input data and therefore learners do not acquire the targeted feature. Future research might establish whether or not such behaviour holds over time and compare these learners with learners of different L1.
REFERENCES


