

Acquiring constraints on variable morphosyntax: SV-VS word order in child Spanish

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Spanish-speaking adults' variation between pre- and post-verbal subject placement is probabilistically constrained by subject, verb, and sentence type.¹ The impact of these factors is not categorical. For example, unaccusative verbs promote, but do not require, post-verbal subject position (e.g., *Llegó Juan ~ Juan llegó*). Such constraints on morphosyntactic variation are highly systematic among adults.² Is the same true for children? Previous research indicates that three-year-old children are sensitive to some constraints on variation, like those conditioning object clitic placement in finite + nonfinite verb constructions in Spanish.³ Nevertheless, other patterns take a long time to develop. For example, some constraints on Spanish subject pronoun expression emerge after age eight.⁴

The current study aims to further our understanding of how children develop sensitivity to constraints on variable morphosyntax by analyzing subject-verb word order in sociolinguistic interviews conducted with 10 monolingual children in Oaxaca, Mexico, ages 6;3-7;8. Lexical and pronominal subjects in contexts that permit subject-verb or verb-subject word order were extracted from the children's oral production data. 19% of the 528 subjects appeared post-verbally, which is commensurate with rates found among Mexican adults.⁵ A binary logistic regression demonstrated that, like adults, the children's subject placement was significantly conditioned by subject, verb, and sentence type. A subject was more likely to appear in post-verbal position if (i) the subject was lexical rather than pronominal, (ii) the verb was unaccusative or copulative rather than transitive or unergative, and (iii) the sentence was interrogative rather than declarative (Table 1).

Table 1. Binary Logistic Regression: Factors contributing to children's use of SV or VS word order.

	Log odds	n	%VS
Subject type			
<i>Lexical</i>	.75	436	22
<i>Pronominal</i>	-.75	92	7
Verb type			
Unaccusative	.69	187	29
Copulative	.33	130	19
Unergative	-.37	53	11
Transitive	-.65	158	9
Sentence type			
Interrogative	.93	10	72
Declarative	-.93	518	28

Note: Log odds over 1.0 indicate that a factor promotes VS word order; log odds < 1.0 indicate that a factor promotes SV word order.

Why are constraints on subject placement and object clitic placement acquired earlier than some constraints on subject pronoun expression? Various explanations are pursued, including the possibility that distributional patterns that are robustly conditioned by lexical/semantic factors, as is the case for subject-verb word order, may be easier for children to detect in the input.

References by topics

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