

The L2 Acquisition of Spanish Focus

A case of incomplete and divergent grammars

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the second language acquisition of Spanish word order with the aim of analysing the availability of optional forms in advanced non-native grammars. In contrast to English, Spanish word order is flexible and the elements of a sentence can appear in more than one configuration (e.g. SV, VS). This may appear to be a case of free alternation. However, such optionality is only apparent as each of the configurations is constrained by defined syntactic rules (depending on the type of verb) and pragmatic rules (depending on the type of information encoded in the sentence). Consequently, this phenomenon is ideal for testing hypotheses about optionality in endstate L2 grammars since two variations of the same structure are present in the input which in turn means that L2 learners need to figure out both the rules that constrain each of the forms and their context of use. In this paper we explore whether this ambiguity in the input may delay the acquisition of these forms until an advanced stage such that alternate forms will still be present in the grammar of near-native speakers of Spanish. Our hypothesis builds upon the assumption that in developing grammars the emergence and persistence of optional forms are highly dependent on the level of systematisation and robustness of the input subjects receive. Consequently, we predict that in the case of word order variation in Spanish advanced learners would go through a persistent stage of optionality since the evidence they receive is not systematic enough to make proper generalisations that would allow them to map each of the forms with its context of use.

In this study we also focus on the source of such optionality arguing that certain errors found in advanced non-native grammars cannot be sufficiently accounted for as simple transfers from the learner's L1. In this respect we also investigate whether optionality in advanced L2 grammars is only derived from features available in the L1 or whether subjects will allow grammars that are unlike their L1 but also divergent from the L2.

2. Optionality in advanced L2 grammars

It has been widely observed that non-native optionality, i.e. where two competing grammars exist in the mental representation of L2 learners, is a common feature of developing grammars even at advanced proficiency levels (White 1991, 1992; Eubank 1994; Sorace 1993, 1999, 2000; Prévost and White 2000). The standard view on optionality is that the optional use of a particular form reveals that L2 learners may be considering grammatical representations that are not exactly target-like but nevertheless may still be congruent with their own interlanguage. The

question that we focus on is why optionality is still permitted at very advanced stages of acquisition, exploring whether the evidence found in the input can affect the stage of optionality in developing grammars. It has been observed that the nature and systematisation of the input is a factor allowing optional forms to linger in advanced L2 grammars. More precisely, Papp (2000) argues that L2 learners need to figure out the status of a rule in the second language and in doing so they need to establish whether that rule is categorical, optional or quasi-optional. The more ambiguous the target language data is, the longer it takes for the learners to learn the rule facilitating lingering stages of optionality. In the case of Spanish word order the input is highly ambiguous since learners are exposed to pairs of structures which are almost identical and which may seem interchangeable in the same contexts:

- (1) a. Ha comprado el libro Juan
 has bought the book Juan
 “Juan has bought the book”
- b. Juan ha comprado el libro

In example (1) the same elements appear in two different configurations and bear different informational status. Specifically, sentence (1a), with a postverbal subject, necessarily implies that the subject is the only new information (i.e. the focus) of the sentence, whereas sentence (1b) where the canonical word order is preserved is necessarily an all-focus sentence. Consequently, these two examples are felicitous in two different contexts – such as in answer to the questions ‘who has bought the book?’ and ‘what happened?’ respectively.

Optionality is a widespread phenomenon in both first and second language developing grammars and is still the subject of much debate in the field of acquisition. Most of the studies in the optionality literature have focused on the emergence of functional categories. For instance, Lardiere (1998, 2006) analyses the case of a Chinese learner of English showing how in the subject’s oral data the past tense morpheme in English is optionally expressed even at an advanced stage where other similar structures, (like definite articles), and relatively more complex structures, (like I-to-C movement), are correctly acquired. In first language acquisition, Poeppel and Wexler (1993) and also Wexler (1994, 1998) have shown how children use both inflected verbs and root infinitives during a stage at around two years of age. Although optional root infinitives should not be allowed in the child’s grammar it is also evident that the nature of this optional stage is not random and both options, in this case the inflected and non inflected verb forms, are legitimate in the child’s grammar at this early stage. Unlike second language learners, though, children seem to go through this optional infinitive stage quite quickly which seems to support the claim that the nature and amount of input plays a crucial role in acquisition even at later stages where interlanguage grammars are stable.

From a theoretical point of view the availability of optional forms in both native and non-native grammars is problematic since in a framework such as Minimalism (Chomsky 1995) there should only be one output for each single derivation. Recent studies on optionality have shown, however, that optionality in L1 grammars is in fact only apparent since the distribution of two or more optional forms may be in

fact be constrained by different discourse conditions (Parodi and Tsimpli 2005) implying that even if a system allows more than one form for the same derivation these forms may not be exactly identical. Robertson's (2000) study of Chinese's L2 use of English articles reached a similar conclusion. He argues that even if two possible variations of the structure may coexist in learner grammars (in this case the overt realisation of articles) the contexts in which the different forms are used are not exactly identical, which means that optionality may only be apparent (and learner's use of two forms is not arbitrary), and that there may be more behind the availability of optional forms than an incorrect representation of the target grammar.

The second issue that we are concerned with in this study is the source of optional forms in second language grammars. It is generally assumed that learners may revert to their native language when they find difficulty in inducing the rules of the target grammar (Sorace 1993; Papp 2000). Consequently, the first language can be the starting point from which learners build their L2 representations but it continues to influence the acquisition process even at an advanced stage. More specifically, if second language learners find the input too vague to build their knowledge of the target language upon it, they may opt for reverting to the setting available in their first language and use it to build representations of the target grammars. The acquisition of focus in Spanish is a good testing ground because focus alters the canonical word order and allows for the same elements to be reorganised in different orders (Zubizarreta 1998; Domínguez 2004) in what apparently constitutes a case of optional word order. In this study we analyse the acquisition of pairs of structures which are apparently identical except for the ordering of their elements (see example 1). Crucially, only one of the two structures that is analysed in our study is available in the L1 (i.e. the non inverted option (1b)). Based on the input that the subjects in our study are exposed to we observe that L2 learners have enough evidence to assume that two optional structures exist in the target language until they learn the discourse-pragmatic constraints of each of the available forms. Also, the linguistic evidence from which L2 learners create grammatical assumptions can be quite ambiguous. Given such an obvious lack of robustness in the input, the learning task is made considerably more difficult and presumably learners will face longer periods of grammatical indeterminacy even at advanced levels of proficiency. It may be possible that during this stage of indeterminacy learners revert to their L1 favouring the one option available in Spanish that is available in English as well. In line with these assumptions, previous studies on the acquisition of Spanish word order have shown that advanced second language learners encounter problems acquiring the pragmatic conditions that constrain word order alterations (Ocampo 1990; Hertel 2003; De Miguel 1993; Lozano 2006).

In this study we follow Sorace's (1993) three types of representations allowed in near-native grammars: convergent, divergent and incomplete L2 end-states. For Sorace, if non-native representations are completely native-like they are *convergent*. If, on the other hand, not all the properties of the target language are observed in the near-native grammar then L2 representations are *incomplete* or *indeterminate*.

Finally, *divergent* representations are those non-native representations which are consistently different from native properties and influenced by the L1 grammar.¹

3. Focus and word order in Spanish

In Spanish, unlike English, word order is quite flexible and any constituent may appear in different positions in the sentence. Such flexibility can be accounted for by focus-related operations which are motivated by prosodic conditions (Zubizarreta 1998). Specifically, assuming that focused elements must receive stress, which is assigned by a stress assignment rule (i.e. the Nuclear Stress Rule (NSR)) to the most embedded constituent (Chomsky and Halle, 1968; Cinque 1993) the focus is expected to appear in sentence-final position even if canonical word order is to be altered. This is illustrated in examples (2b) and (3b) where the subject must appear postverbally and in final position because it is in focus:

- (2) a. What happened?
 b. [_F La estudiante visitó al profesor] SVO
 the student visited to-the professor
 c. Who visited the professor?
 d. Visitó al profesor [_F la **estudiante**] VOS
- (3) a. [_F Juan ha llegado] SV
 Juan has arrived
 b. Ha llegado [_F **Juan**] VS

However, this focus-stress alignment rule only applies if the focus is informational. If the focus is contrastive it can receive stress in situ and the SV(O) canonical order is preserved:

- (4) [_F La **estudiante**] visitó al profesor, (no el decano) SVO
the student visited to-the professor, not the dean

In this sentence the focused subject cannot be associated with the main stress of the sentence, which falls in final position via the NSR. Therefore, focused elements are not always required to appear in sentence-final position in Spanish. The fact that two types of focus constructions exist which allow the subject to appear in different positions may be interpreted as a case of optionality by L2 learners of Spanish. However, the availability of these orders is constrained by pragmatic principles, (i.e. focus). Consequently, in order to properly learn the rules constraining word order in Spanish subjects must learn not only when and how to apply a focus rule in order to correctly map each structure with its context, but also that an apparent optional rule is in fact not optional.

¹ Papp (2000) notes that divergent representations are ambiguous as they allow for optional rules in the L2 to be either differentiated or rejected.

Another structure used in Spanish to mark focus is clitic left-dislocations (Cinque 1990; Zubizarreta 1998). In these structures the focused element appears in final position by virtue of dislocating the given information out of the core clause. A coindexed resumptive clitic pronoun must appear in this construction as illustrated in the following example:

- (5) a. Who has brought the cake?
- b. El pastel, lo ha traído Sara
the cake, it has brought Sarah
“Sarah has brought the cake”

Clitic left-dislocations, unlike other focus-related operations, always require the subject to appear postverbally. Consequently, example (6) with a preverbal subject is ungrammatical:

- (6) *El pastel, Sara lo ha traído
the cake, Sarah it has brought

Therefore clitic left-dislocations, for which there is unambiguous evidence in the input, are relevant in our study because if lack of systematisation in the input is the source of optionality, learners should find learning these forms less problematic than learning structures where alternative word orders exist as in example (1).

4. Experiments

An experiment involving 21 native Spanish speakers living in Spain and 28 English speakers learning Spanish in a UK university was carried out to investigate whether advanced L2 learners of Spanish have acquired the pragmatic restrictions of focus and are able to change word order when required. An advantage over previous research is that both cases of information focus (which always forces movement) and contrastive focus (which is not subject to word order alterations) were tested. Proficiency levels were determined by a cloze test and subjects, all in the final year of a language degree, were divided into three different groups: advanced (scores between 50 and 35), intermediate (scores between 34 and 24) and low (scores between 23 and 0). The data was collected using two different tasks: a Contextualised Production Task (CPT) and Acceptability Judgement Task (AJT). Both tests included 20 questions (including 6 distractors) that required answers with SVO, VOS, VS, SV constructions, sentences with clitic left dislocations (O#Cl-V-S) where the subject is always focused and in final position, and sentences with in situ contrastive focus. The AJT included 2 questions with SVO/VOS orders, 2 questions with CLLDS, 2 questions with contrastive focus and 8 questions with SV/VS contrasts (including four unergative verbs, half of which had narrow focus on the subject, and four unaccusative verbs, half of which had narrow focus on the subject as well). In the CPT, subjects were presented with a context and were asked to provide an appropriate answer using the information provided. Subjects were expected to use verb-subject inversion in cases of information focus, but focus in situ in cases of contrastive focus. All inverted structures were cases of information

focus in the tests. Similarly, the AJT presented two possible answers to a question based on information provided by a brief context. The only difference between the pair of sentences provided was that there was a variation in the ordering of the elements which in turn reflected the different informational status of each of the structures. Since both sentences are grammatically correct in Spanish, even though only one of them is felicitous in each particular context, subjects were asked to rate their acceptability of each of the sentences and did not have to provide absolute grammatical judgements. Next is an example of one of the questions used in this task:

- (7) Last night there was a party in Marta's flat with many foreign students, but you couldn't go. When you see Marta today you ask her "Who danced at the party?"

What would Marta say?

Bailaron las chicas italianas -2 -1 0 +1 +2
 danced the girls Italian
 "The Italian girls danced"

Las chicas italianas bailaron -2 -1 0 +1 +2

Taking into consideration the properties of word order variation in Spanish the hypotheses considered in our study are the following:

1. If learners are not able to restructure the conflicting information they get from the input they will not produce/accept sentences with non-SVO word orders in the right context (their grammars will be divergent).
2. If learners are able to restructure the conflicting information they get from the input they will produce/accept sentences with non-SVO word orders (their grammars will be convergent) beyond transfer effects.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 Contextualised Production Task

The results of the Contextualised Production Task show that the non-native group behaves quite homogeneously, as there are no significant differences in their percentage of use of inversions. Overall, this group prefers to use a non-inverted structure in all the questions they provided, which may imply that L2 advanced learners' use of all the different word orders allowed in Spanish is rare. However, one important finding is that they seem to distinguish between contrastive and non contrastive focus by using a cleft in cases where focus was contrastive as in the following example:

- (8) Es Juan quien compró el periódico
 "It is Juan who bought the newspaper"

Overall, 42% of all the instances with contrastive focus were of the type “It is X who”. Clefts were used instead of inversion (VS) 65% of the time in those cases where the subject was narrowly focused. Another relevant result is that even though subjects show proficient use of clitic-left dislocations in those instances where these structures are appropriate they consistently fail to invert the subject producing *Cl-S-V instead of Cl-V-S. In fact only one instance of a clitic left dislocation was produced with the correct order by one of the most advanced subjects. This result was found across the three proficiency groups.

5.2 Acceptability Judgement Task

The data collected by the Acceptability Judgement Task shows that the non-native group prefers sentences with SVO orders over VOS orders even in contexts where the subject is narrowly focused and should appear postverbally. Interestingly, the control group did not accept VOS as much as expected. These results are illustrated in the following graph which shows the acceptability of SVO and VOS orders by natives and all of the non-native speakers as a group in those structures in which the subject is focussed:

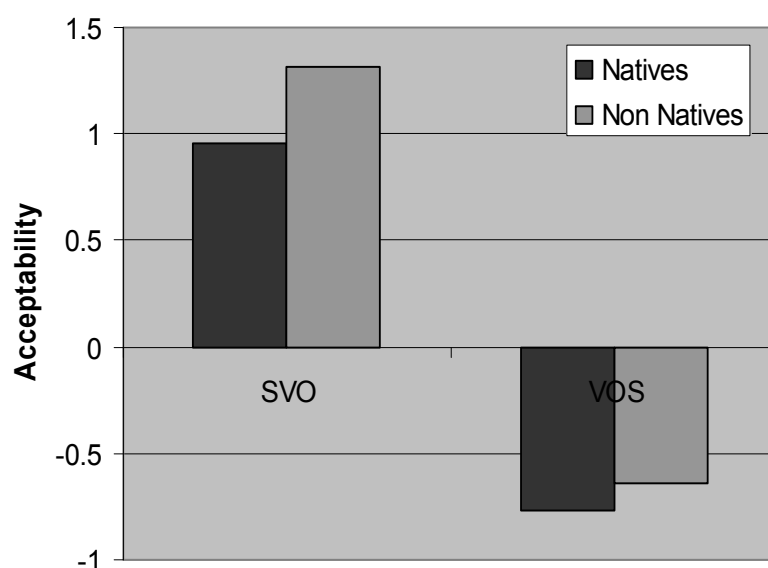


Fig. 1: Acceptability of SVO and VOS orders by native and non-native speakers.

The following figure illustrates the acceptability of the same two structures by each of the proficiency groups (advanced, intermediate and low). As expected, the subjects with lower proficiencies reject the inverted structure and give the higher acceptability scores to the structure which is allowed in their L1. The graph also shows that the advanced group is the non-native group that rejects the VOS the least but, unlike the other two non-native groups, does not give the higher scores to the

SVO structures. In this respect the advanced group is the group which does not seem to favour one of the options over the other, unlike the other two groups which clearly prefer the non-inverted option over the inverted one. This seems to imply a higher level of indeterminacy in the responses of the more advanced group:

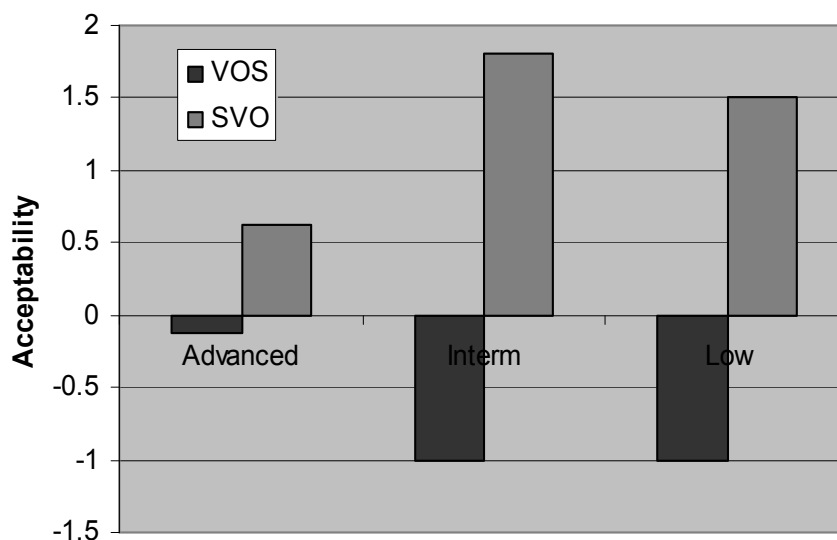


Fig. 2: Acceptability of SVO and SVO structures by three different proficiency groups and native controls.

In the non-native data, differences between the inverted and non inverted options with intransitive verbs (e.g. VS and SV) are only significant in half of the questions. This supports previous research finding that acquiring word order is problematic even at a very advanced stage of acquisition (Leonini 2003; Hopp 2005). However, the analysis of the data in Figure 4 by proficiency groups reveals that the advanced group behaves nativelike (i.e. their responses are statistically not significant) in their acceptability of SV and VS structures in which the focus is on the subject. The advanced group systematically accepts VS in the right contexts and rejects the non-inverted option appropriately, whereas the intermediate and low groups accept both options regardless of the context:

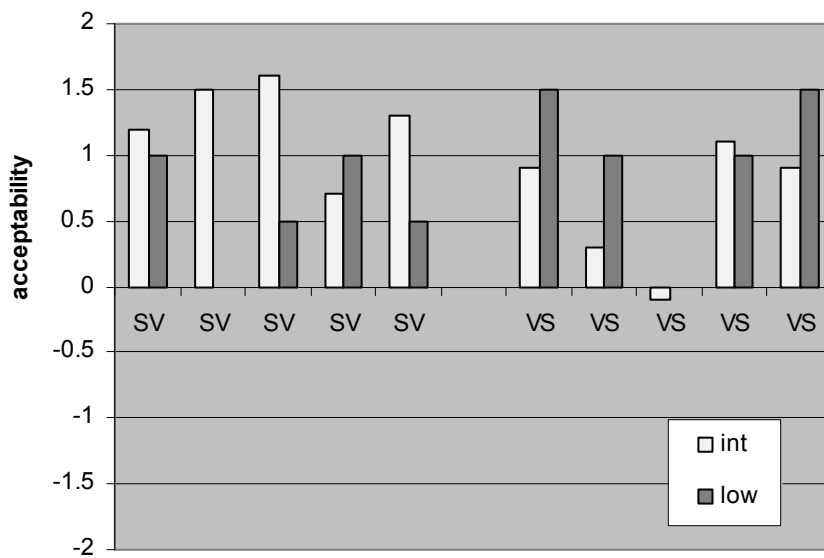


Fig. 3: Acceptability of SV and VS structures by question and proficiency group (low and intermediate).

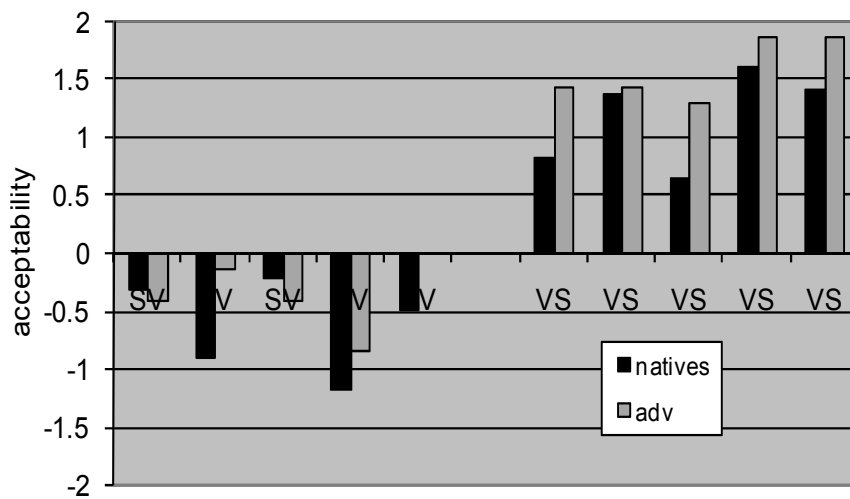


Fig. 4: Acceptability of SV and VS structures by question and proficiency group (advanced and native).

In those structures where clitic left dislocations were tested only the advanced group prefer the option with inversion (i.e. Cl-V-S vs *Cl-S-V) and reject the non-inverted structures, whereas the other two groups accept both (see Figure 5). These

results show differences between the comprehension and production of these forms by the advanced learners:

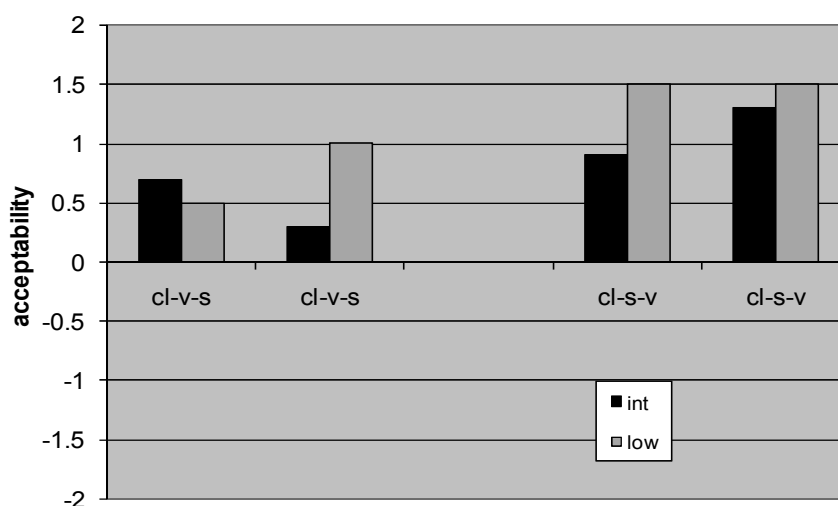


Fig. 5: Acceptability of structures with clitic left dislocations by question and proficiency group (intermediate and low).

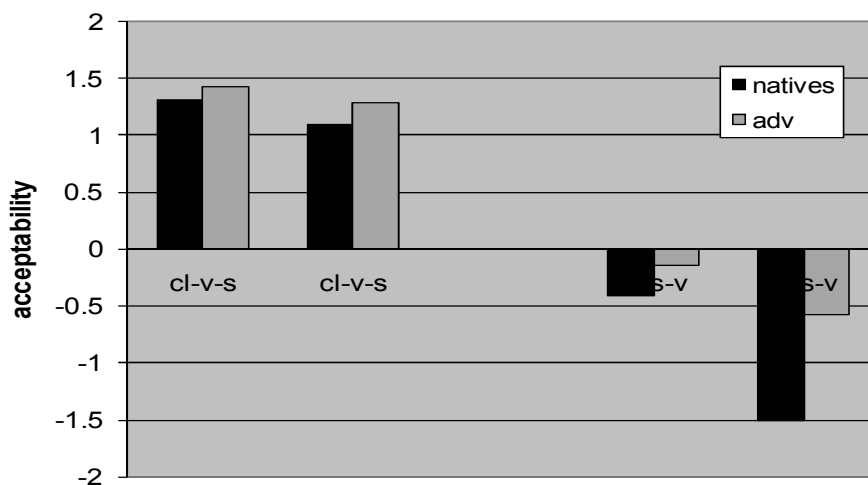


Fig. 6: Acceptability of structures with clitic left dislocations by question and proficiency group (advanced and native).

An interesting result is that unexpectedly the native group does not always accept or produce the inverted option, and this is particularly evident with VOS sentences with a transitive verb and an object, which by being part of the given

information, remains in the sentence. This may be due to the fact that this structure is a marked configuration in Spanish, i.e. a more natural answer to a question where VOS is felicitous would not include all the old information. For instance, even though examples (9a) and (9b) are grammatically correct and appropriate answers to a question such as ‘Who broke the glass?’, sentence (9a) is preferred over (9b) which contains the focus and the old information:

- (9)a. Rompió el vaso [_F **Juan**]
broke the glass Juan
- b. [_F **Juan**]

This difference may be the reason why speakers react unexpectedly and offer a negative rating to sentences like (9a) with VOS orders.

The results clearly show that the acquisition of focus and its effects on word order is problematic even at advanced levels of acquisition. However, the most advanced learners show patterns of acceptability that show that they are moving away from the constraints of their first language and have assimilated some of the new rules of the target language as they accept inverted forms over the non-inverted in most of the questions. This shows that this grammatical area is not fossilised and restructuring of the interlanguage to accommodate the new rules is taking place.

The results also show that subjects across the three proficiency groups are sensitive to the properties of the two focus types (contrastive and not contrastive) as the use of clefts is used as a strategy to mark that the focus is contrastive. The most interesting finding shows mixed behaviour amongst the most advanced group in several of the answers; for instance they produce sentences with dislocated topics with obligatory clitics (a construction which does not exist in their L1) but without the verb-subject inversion, which is observed in the native data. This suggests that even though subjects have not achieved a stable L2 grammar they are able to form constructions that are neither represented in their L1 or the target grammar. In this respect, the non-native representations can be described as being both incomplete and divergent, in the sense of Sorace (1993).

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the data has shown that the non-native speakers do not use inversion like the natives but seem sensitive to semantic restrictions related to focus types and allow subject inversion in some of the contexts controlled in our experiments.

Only the advanced group shows native-like behaviour in most of the structures tested and in their behaviour towards preferring the inverted option. Some significant differences between the learner groups are observed. In particular, the intermediate and low groups accept both options, whereas the advanced group consistently accepted only the inverted option, which is not available in the L1. This shows that optionality declines correctly in the advanced group. Interestingly, even at a stage where subjects allow for an incorrect option, learners with the lowest proficiency allow an option that is not transferred from their L1 (in the case of clitic

left dislocations) and use it productively to show differences in the information encoded in a sentence.

The results show that learner grammars may allow two options in their representation of word order, but this can be interpreted as a phase where they are restructuring knowledge, as they learn the mapping between each structure and the contexts in which they can be used.

Finally, our predictions with regard to the effects that unambiguous input has on the lingering of optional forms in advanced grammars has been attested by the data. Word order variation is a problematic area for L2 learners of Spanish who need to learn the mapping of each of the forms available with the contexts they can be used in, but as the advanced group shows, nativelike proficiency in this area can be attained.

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