

Venezuelan Spanish Intransitives: More Prosodic than You'd Think

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1. Introduction

This study examines the interaction of information structure and semantics on word ordering and prosodic realization in intransitive sentences in Venezuelan Spanish. The aim was to see how the semantic verb type (unaccusative, unergative) interacted with the information status of the noun in the realization of intransitives.

Spanish is commonly held to use syntactic means of marking focus [1]. If the focused word is not already sentence final, then it is moved to the end of the sentence, taking the main stress, as in (1). Contrastive focus is claimed to be marked with initial stress, either in situ or in a cleft, as in (2).

1. Q: *¿Quién se comió la manzana?* 'Who ate the apple?'
A: *Se comió la manzana JUAN.* 'JUAN ate the apple.'
2. Q: *Tomás comió la manzana, es verdad?* 'Tomas ate the apple, right?'
A: *No, fue JUAN el que se comió la manzana.* 'No, it was JUAN who ate the apple'

Spanish is commonly held not to apply 'anaphoric deaccenting' (e.g. [1,2]), that is, to avoid putting the main stress on a word which is given in the preceding context:

3. *Juan miró todas las frutas que estaban en el tazón incluso una MANZANA.* 'Juan looked at all the fruit in the bowl including an apple,'
después Juan se comió la MANZANA. 'then Juan ate the APPLE'

However, [3] claims given information is placed before new where it is syntactically possible in Spanish.

In intransitives, there is only one noun, the subject. If it is focused, we might expect it to be final and stressed; if it is contrastive, initial and stressed; if it is given, initial and unstressed. The latter is also the pattern we would expect in neutral, or broad focus. However, in intransitives, word ordering is also affected by the semantic verb type. Nava [2] found that subject-verb ordering was more common for more 'unergative' verbs, and verb-subject for 'unaccusatives' in Spanish. Unergativity and unaccusativity are end points of a scale related to factors including the agentivity of the subject. Subjects of unergative verbs (e.g. *brincar* 'to jump') are agentive, while subjects of unaccusative verbs (e.g. *salir* 'to leave') are patients [4].

To our knowledge, the interaction of information status marking and semantic verb type in intransitives has not been looked at in spoken Spanish. [5] found that information status overrode verb type in written Spanish, however spoken language may be different as stress can be used as well.

2. Methodology

A picture description task was employed. Participants saw a picture depicting an event and were asked to describe it using the verb printed next to the picture, in response to a question that they heard before seeing the picture. The questions were intended to invoke different information statuses on the noun. There were five verbs for each of the two semantic types (i.e., unergative and unaccusative), two pictures for each verb, and four information status conditions (i.e., neutral, given, focused and contrastive), making a total of 80 items. Ten participants, all native monolingual speakers of Venezuelan Spanish, were recorded in Valera, Venezuela.

3. Results and Discussion

Preliminary results show an interesting picture. In the neutral and given conditions, subject-verb ordering was usually used, along with final stress, indicating givenness was not marked. In the focus and contrast conditions, on the other hand, both verb-subject ordering and initial stress were used frequently; although contrast was more likely to be marked at all than focus. These results are contrary to widespread claims in the literature that (information) focus is marked by word ordering and contrast with initial stress. Rather, for Venezuelan Spanish intransitives at least, both stress placement and word ordering strategies are used to mark both types of focus; fitting with recent empirical studies showing in situ marking of focus to be more common in American varieties of Spanish (e.g. [6], [7]). Unaccusative verbs were slightly more likely to be realised in verb-subject order than unergative verbs, although most sentences of both type were realised in subject-verb order; suggesting the effect of verb type on word ordering in Spanish is fairly weak.

4. References

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