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## Acquisition of the Order between Subject and Verb in Spanish as a Second Language: A Study Based on Chinese Learners

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### Article History:

Received: 6 June 2024; Accepted: 16 July 2024; Published: 7 August 2024

**Abstract** This research investigates the acquisition of the order between subject and intransitive verbs in L2 Spanish under the lexical-semantic constraints and lexical-semantic-pragmatic constraints, based on Chinese speaker learners. In Spanish the subject can be in the preverbal position (SV) or post verbal position (VS), but the order between subject and intransitive verbs is highly determined by context, and it is interpreted differently. And in Chinese there is the locative structure, similar to Spanish, but it follows different restrictions with respect to the order SV/VS. For this study, fourteen (14) Chinese speaker learners of L2 Spanish and a control group of native speakers of Spanish participated in the same language tasks based on judgments of grammaticality. With the statistical results, we will make a justification about the interface hypothesis (IH).

**Keywords** Acquisition, Spanish, SV/VS, Unergative and Unaccusative, Interface Hypothesis

Volume 12, 2024

**Publisher:** The Brooklyn Research and Publishing Institute, 442 Lorimer St, Brooklyn, NY 11206, United States.

**DOI:** 10.15640/ijlc.v12a5

**Reviewers:** Opted for Confidentiality

**Citation:** Deng, M. (2024). Acquisition of the Order between Subject and Verb in Spanish as a Second Language: A Study Based on Chinese Learners. *International Journal of Linguistics & Communication*, 12, 40-49. <https://doi.org/10.15640/ijlc.v12a5>

## 1. Introduction

In Spanish the subject can be in the preverbal position (SV) or postverbal position (VS). But the order between subject and intransitive verbs is highly determined by context, and it is interpreted differently. According to Dominiguez & Arche (2014), as shown in the Table 1, SV order is preferred by unergative verbs in the context of global focus that generates a question like "What happened?" and VS order is interpreted as a context with focus on subject (or local focus) and responds to a question like "Who has snored?". In the case of unaccusative verbs, SV/VS order is the result of a context of global focus, and VS order responds to a question like "Who has arrived?".

**Table 1: SV/VS in unergative and unaccusative structures (Dominiguez & Arche 2014)**

	Global Focus What happened?	Focus on Subject Who has V- ed?
Unergative Verbs	SV [F]Juan ha roncado Juan has snored	VS Ha roncado [F]Juan Has snored Juan.
Unaccusative Verbs	SV/VS [F]Juan ha llegado Juan has arrived. [F Ha llegado Juan] Has arrived Juan.	VS Ha llegado [F]Juan Has arrived Juan.

In Chinese, the order of unergative and unaccusative verbs has different functions (Deng, 2017; Yuan, 1999). Except in discursive contexts that serve to clarify or add some information, unergative verbs can only have preverbal subjects (SV) (Deng, 2017; Wang, 2007). Meanwhile, postposed subjects are generally evident in interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory sentences (Huang & Liao, 2007), as indicated in examples (1) and (2).

(1) Mai le yi ge diannao, ni? (买了一个电脑，你)

buy TMA one computer you  
'Bought one computer, you?'

(2) Ku ba, Xiaohong! (哭吧，小红)

cry Excla. Xiaohong  
'(Do) cry, Xiaohong!'

In contrast, unaccusative verbs can have both preverbal and postverbal subjects. However, the position of the subject depends on whether it is definite or indefinite. When the subject is definite, it can only occur in the preverbal position as shown in example (3). On the other hand, when the subject is indefinite, the subject can either appear in the preverbal position as shown in example (4) or can also emerge in the postverbal position as occurs in example (5). It should be mentioned that the use of each position for the subject constitutes different pragmatic functions (Deng, 2017; Hou, 2012; Yuan, 1999). Specifically, in (4) the theme of the sentence is "three ships," while in (5) the theme is "this area of the sea."

(3) Ta lai le. (他来了)

He come TMA.  
'He has arrived'.

(4) ...san sou chuan zai zhe ge haiyu chen le. (三艘船在这个海域沉了)

three boat in this area sink TMA  
'Three boats sank in this area'.

(5) ...zai zhe ge haiyu chen le san sou chuan. (在这个海域沉了三艘船)

in this area sink TMA three boat  
 'In this area sank three boats'.  
 (Yuan, 1999, pp. 279-280)

In conclusion, there are similarities and differences with respect to order between subject and intransitive verbs between Spanish and Chinese.

In the previous studies, the interface between syntax and pragmatics has been examined regarding global focus vs. focus on subject in learners with different proficiency levels (Domínguez & Arche, 2008, 2014; Hertel, 2003; Lozano, 2002a; Montrul, 2005; Pladevall, 2013; Lozano, 2002b; Lozano & Mendikoetxea, 2009). And the studies show that the acquisition of this phenomena involves different interfaces. Those features that only involve lexical-semantic interfaces are less vulnerable to acquisition than those require lexical-semantic and pragmatic interfaces (Domínguez & Arche, 2008, 2014; Lozano, 2002b; Montrul, 2005; Pladevall, 2013), as a result of the deficit of presentation (Domínguez & Arche, 2008, 2014; Lozano, 2002b; Pladevall, 2013).

As shown in the cited studies, the acquisition of SV and VS order in L2 Spanish represents some vulnerability for speakers of other languages, for example English (Domínguez & Arche 2014; Hertel 2003; Lozano 2002a). However, there are few studies examining the acquisition of this property with Chinese learners of L2 Spanish.

With the purpose of providing new evidence on acquisitional processes related to linguistic interfaces in languages with different properties, this research will be carried out with the following objectives: (i) examine the acquisition of SV/VS order between subject and intransitive verbs (unergative/unaccusative) with Chinese learners across three proficiency levels: basic, intermediate and advanced; (ii) compare the acquisitional performance of this property to a control group of native Spanish speakers, and (iii) contextualize the results within the L2 acquisitional debate. In the next section, the hypotheses of this study are formulated.

## 2. The "Interface Hypothesis" (IH)

The theory of Interface Hypothesis (IH) was put forth by Sorace and Filiaci (2006) as an attempt to account for patterns of non-convergence and residual optionality found at very advanced stages of adult second language acquisition. The IH proposed that language structures involving an interface between syntax and other cognitive domains are less likely to be acquired completely than structures that do not involve this interface (Sorace, 2011). In other words, grammatical operations where the speaker is required to interface between an internal component of the grammar such as syntax and semantics, and an external component such as pragmatics or discourse information, will prove to be very difficult and will not be acquired completely by the second language learner, even at very advanced levels.

According to the IH, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: The lexical-semantic constraints that condition SV/VS order are acquired before the lexical-semantic-pragmatic constraints.

H2: Learners do not overcome difficulties in acquiring lexical-semantic-pragmatic constraints, regardless of their level. That is, even at advanced levels, learners generalize SV order for unaccusative verbs with subject focus, violating Spanish constraints.

## 3. The Study

### 3.1 Participants

The sample for this study consists of two (2) groups of participants: (i) a group of 14 Chinese learners of Spanish as an L2, belonging to three different proficiency levels of that language: five (5) at the basic level, five (5) at the intermediate level and four (4) at the advanced level; (ii) a control group of four (4) native Spanish speakers. The participants of the first group are Chinese learners who are studying a bachelor's degree in Spanish as a foreign language at Beijing Language and Culture University. This study places these students into three levels: basic, intermediate and advanced. The basic level students have completed the first semester of their bachelor's, with approximately 150 hours of contact; the intermediate level students have completed the second year of their bachelor's, accumulating around 1200 hours; and the advanced level students have completed the third year of their bachelor's, and have studied for at least one academic year in a Spanish-speaking country, completing over 2000

hours of contact during their Spanish classes. The Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the Chinese learners of Spanish as an L2.

**Table 2: Chinese Learners of Spanish as an L2**

Spanish Level	Typical Age	Class Hours	Completed Studies
Basic N=5	18-20	150	First semester of college
Intermediate N=5	20-22	1200	Second year of college
Advanced N=4	21-24	More than 2000	Third year of college (at least one year in Hispanic countries)

As in Spanish the order between subject and verb (SV/VS) with intransitive verbs is highly determined by context. So, in this study we have included a control group of native speakers. They will do the same tasks as the L2 Spanish learners do. In other words, it's the same context for the native speakers and learners to choose the SV/VS orders for unergative and unaccusative verbs.

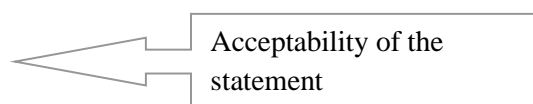
### 3.2 Instruments: Grammaticality Judgements

For the grammaticality judgements, a questionnaire was administered based on everyday stories, which were accompanied by a question either with a global focus or focus on subject, and two sentences identical at the lexical level, but with different syntactic orders (SV/VS), as responses. For creating the stories, ten (10) unaccusative verbs and ten (10) unergative verbs were selected, ten (10) contexts with global focus and ten (10) contexts with focus on subject. And at the end of each story, the subject issued an acceptability or rejection judgement within a Likert scale with values from 1 to 5, in which 1 means total rejection; 2, rejection; 3, neither rejection nor acceptance; 4, acceptance; and 5, total acceptance, as illustrated in example (6).

(6) El lunes cuando Luis llegó a casa, vio que todo el mundo estaba triste, y preguntó a su esposa: “¿Qué pasó?”, y su esposa contestó: (On Monday when Luis came home, he saw that everyone was sad, and he asked his wife: “What happened?”, and his wife answered: “Grandmother died.”)

a. Murió la abuela. (VS)

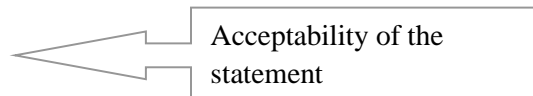
1 2 3 4 5



Acceptability of the statement

b. La abuela murió. (SV)

1 2 3 4 5



Acceptability of the statement

### 3.3 Variables and Types of Analysis

The dependent variables are orders between the subject and verb: SV/VS, and the independent variables include linguistic variables and extra linguistic. The linguistic variables incorporate: (i) pragmatics, which is contemplated either within the global focus or focus on subject, (ii) semantics, which is perceived in the verb type: unergative and unaccusative, while the extra linguistic variables are the different proficiency levels of Spanish as an L2. All data from the tasks was coded according to the study's dependent and independent variables, and subjected to the statistical software SPSS, which allows correlation of the SV/VS order under study with the linguistic and extra linguistic variables. For statistical analysis, the acceptability of SV/VS order was considered at the different levels (basic, intermediate, advanced and native), according to the linguistic and extra linguistic factors under study. In addition, various statistical tests were applied such as Mean, Paired-Samples T Test and Independent-Samples T Test to compare participant performance at each proficiency level and between learners and native speakers.

## 4. Results and Analysis

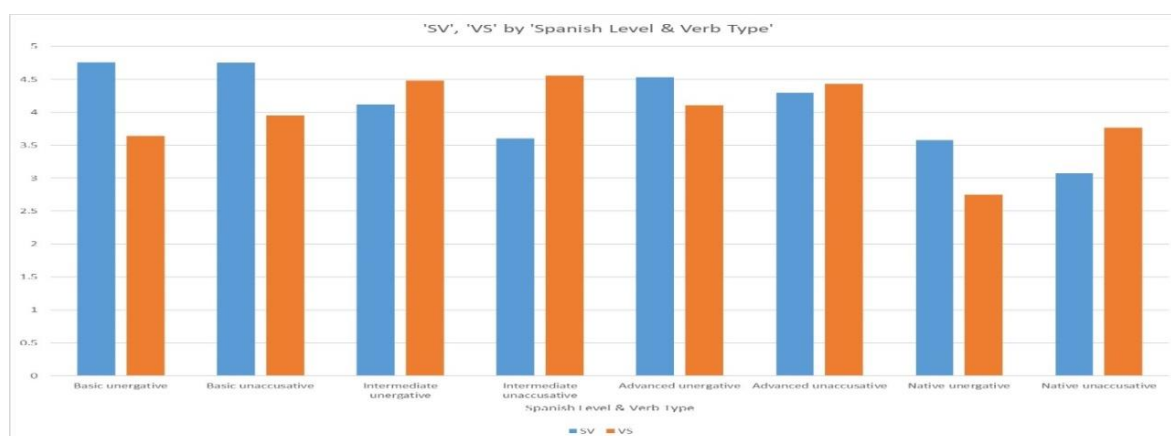
In the following sections, the acquisition of SV/VS order is analysed according to the constraints studied in this research: verb type (unergative/unaccusative) and focus (on subject/global), across the three levels of Chinese learners of Spanish as an L2.

### 4.1 Realizations of SV/VS Order According to Lexical-Semantic Constraints: Unergative and Unaccusative

Table 3 and Graph 1 summarize the average acceptability of SV/VS order according to the Spanish levels and in accordance with lexical-semantic constraints (unergative and unaccusative). According to them, regardless of lexical-semantic constraints, learners at all three proficiency levels accept both orders: SV/VS. More specifically, basic level learners prefer SV order over VS order, contrary to intermediate level learners, who prefer VS order over SV order, regardless of lexical-semantic constraints. In contrast, the advanced level opts for SV order with unergative verbs and opts for VS order with unaccusative verbs, although it does not show a very marked preference.

**Table 3: Average acceptability of SV/VS order according to lexical-semantic constraints**

Spanish Level	Verb Type	SV	VS
Basic	unergative	4.76	3.64
	unaccusative	4.75	3.95
Intermediate	unergative	4.12	4.48
	unaccusative	3.60	4.56
Advanced	unergative	4.53	4.11
	unaccusative	4.30	4.43
Native	unergative	3.58	2.75
	unaccusative	3.07	3.77



Graph 1: Average acceptability of SV/VS order according to lexical-semantic constraints

In the case of the native speakers, they only accept SV order in the case of unergative verbs, but they accept both orders (SV/VS) in the case of unaccusative verbs, although they prefer VS order over SV order. The data of the native speakers is consistent with the data of Mayoral Hernández (2006), as seen in the Table 4.

**Table 4: SV/VS in unergative and unaccusative structures (Mayoral Hernández 2006)**

	SV	VS	Preferred Order
Unergative Verbs	117 (78.5%)	32 (21.5%)	SV
Unaccusative Verbs	74 (54.4%)	62 (45.6%)	SV/VS

The data collected in the study were subjected to the Paired-Samples T Test of SPSS for the purpose of analysing significant differences in learner's behaviour between SV and VS orders for each group of learners. The result of this statistical test reveals that the differences between SV and VS orders are significant at the basic level with both verb types, similar to the native group. On the other hand, no significant differences are observed with unergative verbs at the intermediate level, nor with unaccusative verbs at the advanced level.

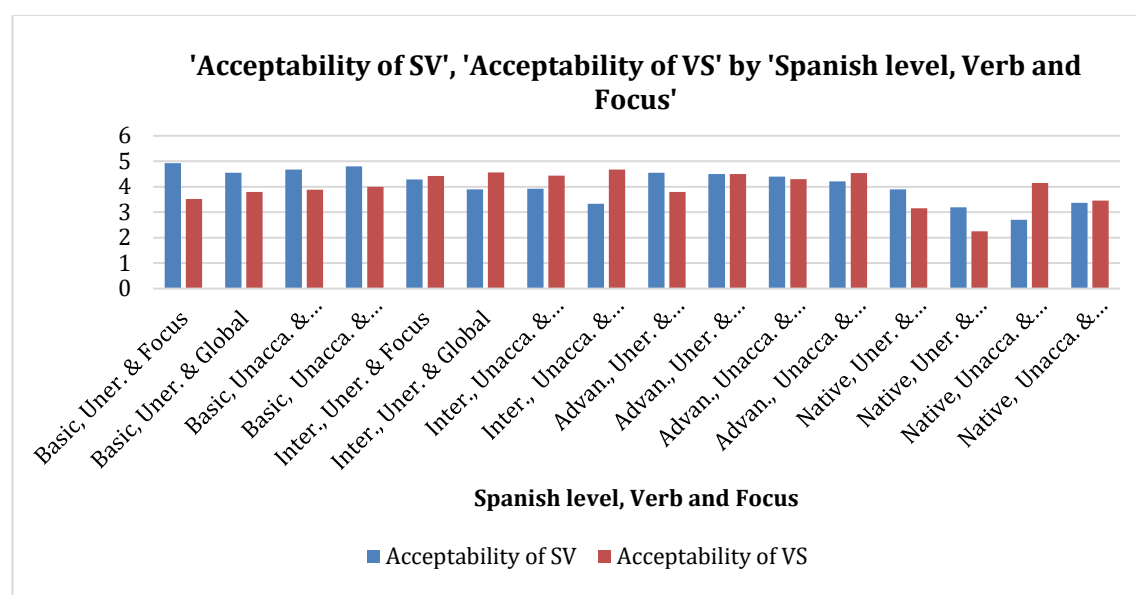
The data also were subjected to the Independent-Samples T Test of SPSS to compare SV/VS behaviour between learners at different levels, and between learners and native speakers. The statistical comparisons between learners demonstrate that the intermediate level differs from the basic level, while the advanced level behaves similarly to the intermediate level, except for unaccusative verbs in SV order. In the other words, the acquisition of SV/VS order according to lexical-semantic constraints becomes fossilized except in the case of unaccusative verbs with SV order. However, the comparisons between learners and native speakers reveal that even advanced level learners diverge from the native group, regardless of the lexical verb type (unergative/unaccusative).

#### 4.2 Realization of SV/VS Order according to Lexical-Semantic constraints (Unergatives and Unaccusatives) and Pragmatic Constraints (Focus on subject/Global)

Table 5 and Graph 2 summarize the average acceptability of SV/VS order according to the Spanish levels and in accordance with lexical-semantic constraints (unergative and unaccusative) and pragmatic constraints (focus on the subject/global). Learners at all three levels accept both orders in the four cases (two verb types by two focus types). The basic level learners prefer SV order in all cases. On the contrary, intermediate level learners opt for VS order in all cases. And the advanced level learners do not show a very marked preference in terms of order type.

**Table 5: SV/VS order according to lexical-semantic and pragmatic constraints**

SpanishLevel	Verb Type	Focus	Acceptability of SV	Acceptability of VS	Order accepted
Basic	Unergative	On the subject	4.92	3.52	SV/VS
		Global	4.55	3.80	SV/VS
	Unaccusative	On the subject	4.68	3.88	SV/VS
		Global	4.80	4.00	SV/VS
Intermediate	Unergative	On the subject	4.29	4.42	SV/VS
		Global	3.89	4.56	SV/VS
	Unaccusative	On the subject	3.92	4.44	SV/VS
		Global	3.33	4.67	SV/VS
Advanced	Unergative	On the subject	4.55	3.80	SV/VS
		Global	4.50	4.50	SV/VS
	Unaccusative	On the subject	4.40	4.30	SV/VS
		Global	4.21	4.54	SV/VS
Native	Unergative	On the subject	3.90	3.15	SV/VS
		Global	3.19	2.25	SV
	Unaccusative	On the subject	2.70	4.15	VS
		Global	3.37	3.46	SV/VS



**Graph 2: SV/VS order according to lexical-semantic and pragmatic constraints**

The native speakers accept both orders of SV and VS, in the case of unergative verbs with focus on subject and in the case of unaccusative verbs with global focus. But they only accept the order SV in the case of unergative with global focus, and VS order in the case of unaccusative with focus on subject, rejecting the other order. The data of the native speakers is not consistent with the preference of the data of Dominiguez & Arche (2014). But as we know, in Spanish the order between subject and verb (SV/VS) with intransitive verbs is highly determined by context, and both order SV/VS are acceptable to some extent, that's why we collected the data of native speakers and of learners under the identical context, then do the comparison.

These data collected were subjected to the Paired-Samples T Test of SPSS to analyse the significant differences in the behaviour of the learners between the SV and VS orders of each group of learners in the four cases (two types of verbs by two focus). The results of tests show that no group of learners behaves similarly to the native group. The basic level group prefers the SV order, except in the case of unergative verbs with global focus, in which they do not prefer one order over the other. The intermediate level group does not show any difference between the SV and VS orders, except in the case of unaccusative verbs with global focus, in which they prefer the VS order over SV order. The advanced group does not show differences between the two orders, except in the case of unergative verbs with focus on subject, in which the learners prefer the SV order over VS order. These data contrast with those of the control group of native speakers, which show a preference for the SV order over the VS order with unergative verbs, regardless of focus. On the other hand, in the case of unaccusative verbs, native speakers opt for the VS order instead of SV order in cases of subject focus, and do not show a preference for any order in cases of global focus.

These data were subjected also to the Independent-Samples T Test to analyse the SV/VS order behaviour both among learners of different levels and between learners and native speakers. The statistical comparisons between learners reveal that the intermediate level differs from the basic level, except in the case of unaccusative verbs with subject focus and VS order. Meanwhile, the advanced learners behave similarly to the intermediate level, except in the case of unergative verbs with subject focus and VS order, and in the case of unaccusative verbs with global focus and SV order. On the other hand, the comparisons between the advanced level and the native group reveal that even the advanced learners diverge from native speakers, except in the two cases of focus on subject and VS order, with unergative and inaccusative verbs.

In summary, there is no systematic pattern in the acquisition behaviour of the SV/VS order in learners. Those at the basic level opt for the SV order over VS order. Those at the intermediate level, contrary to the basic level, prefer the VS order over the SV order. Finally, those at the advanced level do not show a marked preference for any order. The comparisons between learners and native speakers reveal that even advanced learners diverge from the native group. The detailed comparisons are summarized in the Table 6.



**Table 6: Comparison of SV/VS order between advanced learners and native speakers**

Factor	Verb		Order	Does the Advanced level behave similarly to the native group?
Lexical-semantic constraints	Unergative		SV	No (.000)
			VS	No (.000)
	Unaccusative		SV	No (.000)
			VS	No (.001)
Lexical-semantic and pragmatic constraints	Unergative	On the subject	SV	No (.002)
			<b>VS</b>	<b>Yes (.092)</b>
		Global	SV	No (.000)
			VS	No (.000)
	Unaccusative	On the subject	SV	No (.000)
			<b>VS</b>	<b>Yes (.504)</b>
		Global	SV	No (.003)
			VS	No (.000)

## 5. Discussions and Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal that basic-level learners prefer the SV order, regardless of the verb type or focus. These findings largely coincide with previous studies of Domínguez & Arche (2008, 2014) and Pladevall (2013).

In relation to the acquisition of lexical-semantic constraints, the statistical comparisons between the different learner levels, and between the native group and the advanced level show that: (i) the behaviour of learners at the three levels is not affected by the verb type, (ii) the intermediate level learners differ from basic level learners, instead of opting for the SV order as the basic level learners do, the intermediate level learners opt for the VS order regardless of the verb class, and (iii) the advanced level learners do not differ significantly from the intermediate level learners, except in the case of unaccusative verbs with the SV order, but they differ from the native group, who prefers the SV order with unergative verbs and VS with unaccusatives. For their part, the advanced level learners accept the VS order with unergative verbs and generalize the SV with unaccusative verbs. These results are different from those of Hertel (2003), who documents that the advanced level only over generalizes the VS order. Furthermore, they seem to demonstrate that acquisition fossilizes at the advanced level, which is a finding that contrasts with previous studies of Domínguez & Arche (2008, 2014), Lozano & Mendikoetxea (2009) and Montrul (2005) on this subject, where they find that advanced learners acquire lexical-semantic constraints.

On the other hand, the results offered in this study regarding the lexical-semantic and pragmatic constraints in the group of Chinese learners of Spanish as an L2 support that intermediate level learners over generalize the VS order in the context of unergative verbs with global focus, a fact that reinforces previous findings of Domínguez & Arche (2008, 2014) and Hertel (2003).

In the context of global focus, advanced level learners accept both orders SV and VS, but prefer the VS order with unaccusative verbs, similarly to the native Spanish group, which confirms previous studies of Domínguez & Arche (2008, 2014) and Hertel (2003) corresponding to this context.

In the context of subject focus, advanced level learners prefer the SV order with unergative verbs, similar to the native group, a fact that confirms Hertel's findings (2003) in relation to unergative verbs, meanwhile rejects Lozano's conclusions (2002a, 2002b). However, these learners also over generalize the SV order with unaccusative verbs, which did not corroborate Hertel's (2003) nor Lozano and Mendikoetxea's (2009) corresponding findings for unaccusative verbs.

Statistical analyses reveal that the acquisition process has fossilized, except in the case of unergative verbs with focus on subject and VS order and in the case of unaccusative verbs with focus on subject and VS order. But this finding is



different from previous studies of Domínguez & Arche (2008, 2014), Hertel (2003), Lozano, (2002a, 2002b), Lozano & Mendikoetxea (2009) and Montrul (2005).

In summary, the Chinese advanced learners do not behave similarly to the native group, neither in accordance with the lexical-semantic constraints, nor in accordance with the lexical-semantic and pragmatic constraints, as seen in the Table 7. These findings seem to demonstrate that not only the pragmatic constraints (focus), but also the lexical-semantic constraints are complex and vulnerable for Chinese learners of Spanish as an L2.

**Table 7: Acquisition of the SV/VS order of advanced Chinese learners**

Restrictions	Conditions		Acquisition	Fossilization	Over acceptance	Preferred form	
Lexical-semantic	Unergative	SV	No	Yes	Yes	SV	
		VS	No	Yes	Yes		
	Unaccusative	SV	No	No	Yes	SV/VS	
		VS	No	Yes	Yes		
Lexical-semantic and prag-matic	Unergative	On the subject	SV	No	Yes	Yes	SV
			VS	Yes	-----	-----	
		Global	SV	No	Yes	Yes	SV/VS
			VS	No	Yes	Yes	
	Unaccusative	On the subject	SV	No	Yes	Yes	SV/VS
			VS	Yes	-----	-----	
		Global	SV	No	Yes	Yes	SV/VS
			VS	No	Yes	Yes	

According to the results, we reject the H1 which predicted that the lexical-semantic constraints conditioning the SV/VS order would be acquired before the lexical-semantic-pragmatic constraints. Because neither the lexical-semantic-pragmatic constraints, nor the lexical-semantic constraints are acquired in this study. So, we confirm the H2 which proposed that learners would not overcome the difficulties in acquiring the lexical-semantic-pragmatic constraints, regardless of their level.

The results demonstrate that learners even at the advanced level do not acquire the pragmatic constraints of Spanish because they over generalize the SV order with unaccusative verbs with focus on subject, which violates the constraints of Spanish. So, their behaviour is contrary to the native group, who accepts only the order VS, and rejects the order SV. The overgeneralization of the SV order with unaccusative verbs seems to confirm Sorace and Filiaci's (2006) proposal, which implies that shallow processing may resort to L1 syntactic representations if these are more "economical" than those of L2. This is the case in Chinese, a language that has the SV order as the only option in the corresponding context.

There are still some limitations to the study, as an example, the participants and tasks are limited. In the future, we will investigate the acquisition processes of this property with Hispanic learners of Chinese as an L2 and compare the results with this study.

**Conflict of Interest:** None declared.

**Ethical Approval:** Not applicable.

**Funding:** None.

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