

# ¿Va primero el verbo OR El sujeto va primero?: Subject-Verb order in Latin American Spanish

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## INTRODUCTION

Spanish systematically constrains word order variation of subject and verb. However, **Subject Verb (SV)** and **Verb Subject (VS)** constructions are accepted by speakers and are produced regularly in spontaneous speech. For example,

- 1) a. Catalina cantó. (SV)      Cantó Catalina. (VS)  
b. Catalina sing-3SG.PST      sing-3SG.PST Catalina  
    `Catalina sang.'              `Catalina sang.'

What determines when each of these constructions is acceptable? This study adds to the literature on subject placement by assessing the acceptability of SV/VS constructions among Spanish speakers of several dialects in Latin America.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the dialectal differences, if any, on subject placement acceptability?
- Does unergativity/unaccusativity influence SV/VS order acceptability?
  - Unergative verb: *subject is the doer of the action*
  - Unaccusative verb: *subject is the undergoer of the action*
- Does pragmatic condition affect subject placement preference?
  - wide-focus (WF): *no presupposition*
  - subject-narrow focus (SNF): *subject is the only information not presupposed*
  - subject-old-information (SOI): *subject is the only presupposed information*

## METHODS

Survey:

- Hosted on Qualtrics Research Suite and administered through Prolific
- Likert scale rating for SV & VS word order in Spanish
- 2x3 Factorial Approach w/ 12 target items (see **Table 2** for examples)
  - Two intransitive verb types & three pragmatic conditions

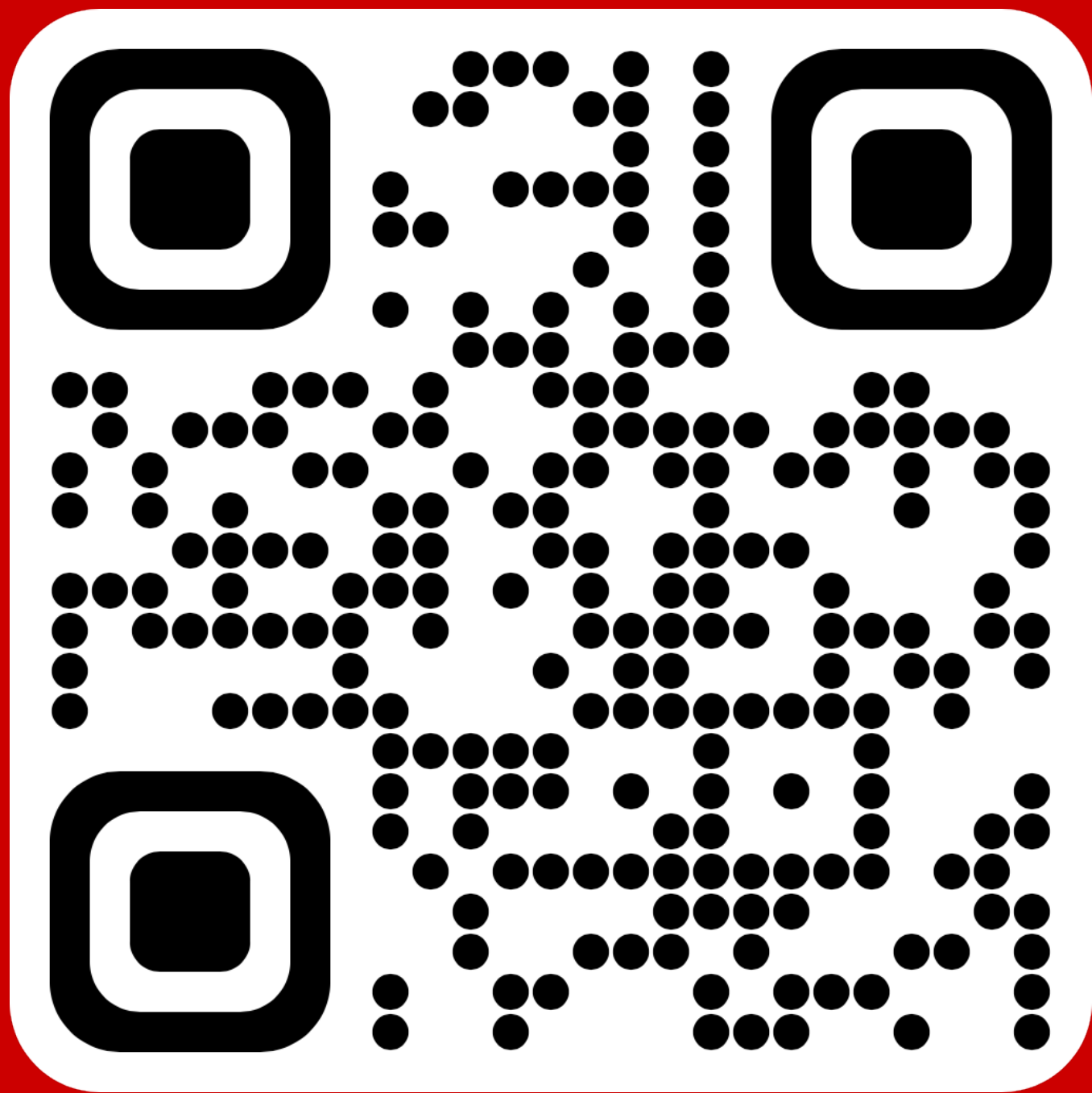
Data:

- 1656 acceptability ratings from 69 survey participants from three Spanish-speaking Regions: Caribbean/Andean/Central

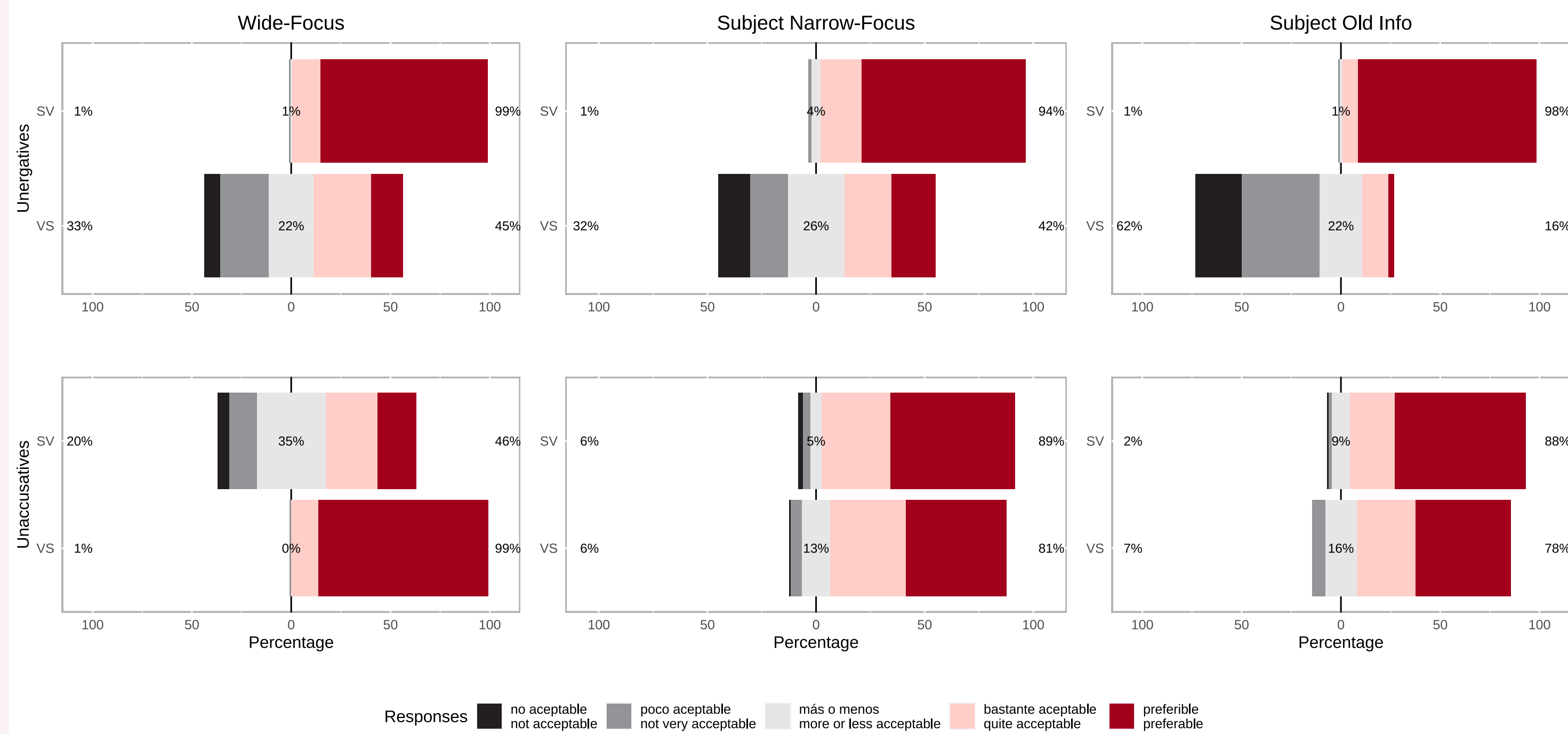
## FINDINGS

- Region was **not** a significant predictor.
- In sentences with **unergative** verbs, there is a strong preference for **SV** order and a general dislike for VS order.
- In **wide-focus** sentences with **unaccusative** verbs, there is a preference for VS order and a general dislike for SV order. However, there is no preference in focus contexts, with participants rating both VS and SV orders highly.
- These findings suggest **both** information structure and argument structure influence speaker preferences with respect to word order, in contrast to Ortiz-López (2009), who found no significant effects of information structure, and Corr (2012 & 2016), who found the SV/VS order preference in wide-focus contexts not to be dependent on the unergative/unaccusative divide.
- This study adds to the literature by establishing the connection between argument structure and information structure and asserting that the data support the Unaccusative Hypothesis (see Perlmutter & Postal 1974).

SV/VS order  
acceptability and  
preference is affected by  
both **verb type** and  
**pragmatic condition** in  
sentences with  
intransitive  
verbs.



**Figure 1: Word Order Ratings for Verb Types by Pragmatic Conditions**



**Table 1: What makes VS more acceptable? Linear Regression results**

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Reference Category: Verb Type: Unergative Pragmatic Condition: Subject Narrow-Focus				
Verb Type: Unaccusative	1.05	0.123	8.56	<0.001
Pragmatic Condition: Wide-Focus	0.04	0.123	0.35	0.723
Pragmatic Condition: Subject Old Information	-0.83	0.123	-6.73	<0.001
Verb Type: Unaccusative   Pragmatic Condition: WF	0.59	0.174	3.38	<0.001
Verb Type: Unaccusative   Pragmatic Condition: SOI	0.80	0.174	4.64	<0.001

**Note:** The dependent variable is the acceptability of VS order. Positive coefficients imply that the VS ordering is more acceptable.  
**Takeaway:** The linear regression corroborates what the rows related to VS order in Figure 1 show: that the relationship between verb type and pragmatic condition is indeed significant for VS order.

**Table 2: Target Items Examples**

Pragmatic Condition	Context	SV	VS	Translation
<b>Unergatives</b>				
WF	Jorge pregunta: `¿Catalina, que pasó?' Catalina contesta: `¿Quién se sonrió primero?' Elsa contesta:	Valentina bostezó.	Bostezó Valentina.	Jorge asks: `What happened?' Catherine replies: `Valentina yawned.' Paula asks Elsa: `Who smiled first?' Elsa replies: `Victor laughed.'
SNF	Isabela le pregunta a Olivia: `¿Qué hizo Camila hoy?' Olivia:	Camila patinó todo el día.	Patinó Camila todo el día.	Isabela asks Olivia: `What did Camila do today?' Olivia: `Camila skated all day.'
<b>Unaccusatives</b>				
WF	Emilio pregunta: `¿Ah? ¿Qué pasó?' Franchesca:	Una planta creció en el carro.	Creció una planta en el carro.	Emilio asks: `Oh? What happened?' Franchesca: `A plant grew in the car.'
SNF	La maestra pregunta: `¿Quién desapareció?' Anastasia contesta:	Florencia desapareció.	Desapareció Florencia.	The teacher asks: `Who disappeared?' Anastasia replies: `Florence disappeared.'
SOI	Luna pregunta: `¿Qué pasa con el agua?' Cristina contesta:	El agua está hirviendo.	Está hirviendo el agua.	Luna asks: `What is wrong with the water?' Cristina replies: `The water is boiling.'

## REFERENCES

[1] A. Corr. "Subject inversion in Ibero-Romance". In: Unpublished Mphil dissertation: Cambridge (2012). [2] A. Corr. "Wide-focus subject-verb inversion in Ibero-Romance: A locative account". In: Glossa: a journal of general linguistics 1.1 (2016). [3] L. A. Ortiz López. "El español del Caribe: orden de palabras a la luz de la interfaz léxico-sintáctica y sintácticopragmática". In: Revista internacional de lingüística iberoamericana : RILI 7.2 (14) (2009). [4] D. Perlmutter and P. Postal. "Lectures on relational grammar". In: Linguistic Society of America Summer Institute, University of Massachusetts, Amherst (1974). [5] Prolific. 2014. Oxford, UK. <https://www.prolific.com> [6] Qualtrics Research Suite. 2005. Provo, Utah, USA. [bostonu.qualtrics.com](http://bostonu.qualtrics.com)