

Focus interpretation and the syntax-prosody filter in Spanish

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Research questions and main claims This paper evaluates the relation between the form and the focus interpretation of sentences in Spanish. We address two research questions (RQ) linked to this topic:

- RQ1: To what extent does sentence form (here: word order + position of nuclear stress) unambiguously mark the focus-background partition (FBP) of a sentence?
- Claim 1: Sentence form does not mark the FBP in Spanish, since sentence forms are often ambiguous and bad predictors of FBP (empirical claim based on experimental data).
- RQ2: What is the contribution of syntax and prosody to focus interpretation, if they do not mark the FBP?
- Claim 2: Sentence form serves indeed as a filter reducing the number of possible FBPs, but contextual cues are often necessary for the definitive focus interpretation.

Background In Spanish, the FBP influences both syntax and prosody: focused constituents can be fronted, cleft from the background, brought into final position, focused constituents carry the nuclear stress, and postfocal material is often prosodically compressed (cf. among others ZUBIZARRETA (1998), (1999), and recent experimental studies by GABRIEL (2010), HOOT (2016), HEIDINGER (2014), MUNTENDAM (2013), VANRELL & FERNÁNDEZ SORIANO (2013), JIMÉNEZ-FERNÁNDEZ (2015)). As concerns RQ1 (i.e., the predictive power of sentence forms w.r.t FBP), systematic studies are missing. We find occasional hints that a certain structure unambiguously associates with a certain FBP; e.g. ZUBIZARRETA (1999) notes that (1) is limited to narrow subject focus. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the follow-up question (RQ2) is not addressed in the relevant literature at all.

- (1) (Who ate the mouse?)
Se comió un ratón [el **gato**]_F
ate a mouse the cat
'It was the cat who ate a mouse'

Details on claim 1 We conducted a production experiment (36 participants, peninsular Spanish), and analyzed the produced sentence forms w.r.t. their frequency and focus marking power. We considered sequences of two postverbal constituents, and measured the extent to which the sentence forms (verb-**A-B**, verb-**B-A**, verb-**A-B**, verb-**B-A**) are specified for only one FBP. The postverbal constituents we considered are direct object, locative adjunct, and depictive secondary predicate. The main results are: (i) Half of the produced sentence forms are not only ambiguous, but even bad probabilistic predictors of the intended FBP. (ii) Even if an unambiguous sentence form exists for a given FBP, that sentence form is generally produced less frequently than the ambiguous sentence forms.

Details on claim 2 Since sentence forms are often ambiguous with respect to FBP, the interplay between syntax and prosody in Spanish is better described as a filter for FBPs than as a focus marking device. Depending on how many FBPs survive the syntax-prosody filter, contextual cues are more or less important for the definitive focus interpretation of a sentence. Contextual cues (such as an overt *wh*-question) are more important for the definitive focus interpretation in cases where several FBPs survive the syntax-prosody filter than in cases where only one FBP survives. We argue that the lack of unambiguous

focus marking is not surprising, but rather expected: Context is informative about FBP, and given the large number of possible FBPs the creation of unambiguous sentence forms would be both costly and partly redundant (PIANTADOSI ET AL. (2012), LEVINSON (2000)).

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