

TIMEA BÁNKI

COMPARISON OF THE INFORMATIONAL STRUCTURE OF
SPANISH AND HUNGARIAN AND ITS EDUCATIONAL
ASPECT

Theses of the PhD dissertation

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1. Identification of the problem, objectives

In my dissertation, I investigated how the knowledge of the informational structure can be built in the Spanish lessons and I examined what impact the knowledge of the informational structure has on the learners' communicational and grammatical competences. I had found that, using the traditional grammatical terms, it was hard to explain the structure of a sentence as in (1), where the focus position of the subject is at the end of the sentence, which is characteristic of the Spanish language. Furthermore, in my experience the knowledge of the informational structure can also facilitate the understanding and the acquisition of the use of explicit and implicit subjects. I developed study materials for this purpose. I prepared exercises and explanations which can help in teaching the syntax of Spanish and Hungarian – both having seemingly free word order. Then I examined the syntactic knowledge of the students taught with this method and that of the control group.

(1)

¿Quién pintó la Guernica en 1937? Who painted Guernica in 1937?

En 1937 lo pintó [FOC **Picasso**].

in 1937 that-CL painted Picasso

In 1937 [FOC **Picasso**] painted it.

2. Structure of the dissertation, new findings

Chapter one compares how the focus and the topic is expressed in Spanish and Hungarian. First I review the theoretical background. I follow the theory of Lambrecht, 1994; Reinhart, 1981 and Sasse, 1987 in the general linguistic analysis. My research is based mainly on the works of Zubizarreta, Zagona, Bosque and Gutiérrez-Rexach in the case of Spanish; and of É. Kiss and Gécseg-Kiefer in the case of Hungarian. In this chapter, I give an overview of the two main notions of informational structure, the focus and the topic, then I compare how

they appear in Hungarian and Spanish. The two languages show a lot of similarities with regards to the topic, while in the case of the focus, the two languages present significant differences.

The most important findings of the comparison are as follows:

- Structural focus takes an immediately preverbal position in Hungarian, while it takes the rightmost position in Spanish (1).
- There is a preverbal focus position in Spanish as well, however, it bears extra contrastive meaning.
- The preverbal focus in Hungarian is exhaustive: the constituent in focus position identifies the elements to which the statement is exhaustively true (É.Kiss, 1998).
- The exhaustive feature is not connected to the preverbal focus position in Spanish, this meaning can be achieved by using the cleft construction (as in (2)) (Feldhausen, del Mar Vanrell, 2015):

(2)

Fue Pedro quien compró esta película.

was Pedro who bought this film

'It was Pedro who bought this film' 'PEDRO¹ bought this film (and no one else).

- The Hungarian particle *csak*, meaning 'only' (*solo* in Spanish), can also express exhaustivity, hence any element connected to it bears an inherent focus feature. In Hungarian, *csak* +XP usually take preverbal position. In Spanish, *solo* can be preverbal by itself (as in (3)) or it can precede the verb together with another element (as in (4)).

¹The capital letters signal the focus.

(3)

Solo hab-ía en toda la ciudad tres personas.
Only aux-pst.3sg in whole the city three persons
'There were only three people in the whole city.'

(4)

Solo los extranjeros pued-en tener tanta suerte
only the foreigners can have so much luck
en este país
in this country
'Only foreigners have such luck in this country.'

- The two languages use the same strategies to distinguish sentences with no topics (thetic) and sentences with topic-comment divisions (categoric). In categoric sentences – in which the topic of the sentence is the logical subject of the sentence – the topic occupies a sentence initial position, while in thetic sentences – without a topic – the indefinite NP takes a position inside the predicate in a post verbal position.

Hay un perro en la habitación.

Van egy kutya a szobában.

Llueve. / Nieva.

Esik (az eső). Havazik.

Suena el teléfono.

Csörög a telefon.

- Time and duration adverbials take a sentence initial position in both languages.
- There can be multiple topics in both languages and their order is free in both languages.
- There are differences between the two languages with regard to left dislocated structures. In Spanish, left dislocation can be used both for topic change and when introducing a new topic, while in Hungarian, the construction *ami x-et illeti* ('as for X') cannot

introduce a new topic, it can only be used for topic shift, with a contrastive feature.

Chapter 2 discusses how one can translate focus. In this chapter I examine the compatibility of information structures of Hungarian and Spanish: their similarities, differences through a parallel corpus. The corpus is built up from the following works:

Szerb Antal: *A Pendragon legenda*, Budapest, 2011, Magvető (spanyol nyelvre fordította: Xantus Judit).

Arturo Pérez-Reverte *A flamand tábla rejtélye*, Budapest, 1996, Helikon (magyar nyelvre fordította: Dobos Éva).

In the analysis I compared whether the focus and topic constructions in the source languages kept their role, and whether the topic and focus constructions found in the target language were originally topics and foci.

I concluded that in the Hungarian translation there are more focus constructions than in the original Spanish work, and I also found that when translating into Spanish, focused elements tend to disappear. It seems that Hungarian uses the focus construction more frequently and prefers it in the case of deictic and anaphoric adverbials, in which the meaning is less straightforward (*so, there, here*). Another finding is that there is a difference in topic shift (21 out of 45 topic shift was dissimilar). It can be explained by the fact that the truth value of a sentence is unaffected by a specific definite NP being in topic position. As opposed to focusing, through which the truth value of a sentence is changed. For this reason, the translators deviate from the original text in case of a topic shift.

One of my aims was to collect translation solutions. I found the following translation strategies to bridge the informational structural gap between the two languages:

- Changing from active to passive structures. .
- Using cleft sentences in Spanish to translate Hungarian focus-constructions (as in (2)).
- Adding or deleting accusative clitics.
- Changing the order of accusative and dative constituents.
- Setting the position of time, place and manner adverbials with respect to their information structural role.
- When translating into Hungarian, it is worth to keep an eye on whether we add more focus constructions than there is in the original text.
- We need to take into account that unlike *csak* in Hungarian, Spanish *solo* can take the preverbal position by itself.

Chapter 3 discusses the relationship between language teaching and linguistics, or more precisely, it discusses teaching Spanish as a foreign language and its generative linguistic background. I have reviewed how the analysis of language learning has changed with special scrutiny on the investigation of this thesis. The results of my experiment will either support or refute these.

One of the investigated issues is whether language transfer is gradual or modular. Hertel (2003) argues for a gradual language transfer, she investigated the acquisition of the word order of unmarked and subject focus constructions, and concluded that the higher the level of the learner the higher percentage of the correct usage of constructions. This experiment differs from mine in that in my experiment the learner never got traditional classroom instruction on the structures and their language book did not discuss word order issues, furthermore in the case of Hungarian-Spanish language pair, the subject can be null in both languages, which causes a difficulty in the case of English and Spanish.

When teaching informational structure, one of the issues is the availability of switching between syntax and discourse interface. Sorace (2011) claims that acquiring the information structure of a

language is the hardest for language learners and thus it is only worth to deal with it in upper intermediate groups. On the other hand White (2011) argues that every part of the language incurs an equal amount of weight on the language learner. My results support the idea that simple information structural issues can be taught at a beginner level as well.

In beginner groups it is important to decide how much explicit instruction will be on the language course (VanPatten, 2004) and how much they will use their mother tongue (Lozano, 2006). My method is grounded in the claim that the language learning of young adults can be informed by explicit explanations of structural constructions. As Spanish is usually the second or third language in Hungary, inevitably the question arises: how much influence has the previously studied language on the next foreign language. In all likelihood in case of adult language learners the rules learned before have an effect on the new language, however, the study of these issues concerning Hungarian and other foreign languages is isolated and rare. In my research I found that in case of uncertainty the learner goes back to the rules of their first foreign language rather than their mother tongue.

3. The experiment

Chapter 4 presents the study materials developed by me and the results of a trial run. I describe the experiment and its aims, the methods, and the stages of the experiment. You can find the exercises in the appendix. The hypothesis of the experiment was that creating a conscious knowledge of informational structural differences will help the students in acquiring the language, and the instruction can start at a beginner level.

Method

There were different stages of the experiment: (i) pre-research, (ii) study material development and adjustment to class-room setting for

beginner and intermediate groups, (iii) measuring at the end of first semester, (iv) investigation through focus group – during which I collected students' observations. During the experiment, the findings of a phase always informed the creation of the next phase.

(i) The aim of the pre-research was to establish the syntactic knowledge of the students. We observed whether they correctly use information structural constructions in everyday situations, as well as, whether they can answer information questions.

In this phase, there were 25 participants (age 19-25) from the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. Their Spanish level is B1, and Spanish is their second or third language. They did not know the notion of information structure.

While developing the study material, I taught them the following about information structure: On sentence level: topic-comment division of sentences, the notion and usage of topic, the structural position of informational and exhaustive focus, meaning differences with respect to focused elements. On text level: I called their attention to the flow of information. The aim of developing new study materials was on the one hand to raise awareness to informational structure and the differences it creates, and on the other hand, to improve their communicational skills by using frequently these structures. As a consequence, I tried to use as many exercise types as possible. To make sure that they understand the differences, I explained it in Hungarian and brought contrastive examples and texts, and presented colorful illustrations to show the position of grammatical roles (e.g. the subject was blue, the predicate green, the object was red etc.). The students need to build the question and the answer from the pieces of colorful papers in front of them, which shows the position the grammatical role takes in the sentence and the similarities and differences between the languages. After the matching exercises, they practiced through more open ended questions and situations to ensure a general improvement in communicational skills. There were

altogether 24 exercises, which include exercises taken from textbooks, modified exercises and also exercises made by me. I illustrated the Hungarian instruction with numerous contrastive examples in both languages.

In the first experiment there were 24 beginners (A1 and A1+) and 25 intermediate (A2+) students. In the control group there were 29 participants. They had a similar level of language knowledge, they had at least an intermediate knowledge of English or German. I repeated the experiment in the following year in a beginner group (A1+ level). The composition of the test and the control group were similar, both groups had 15 participants.

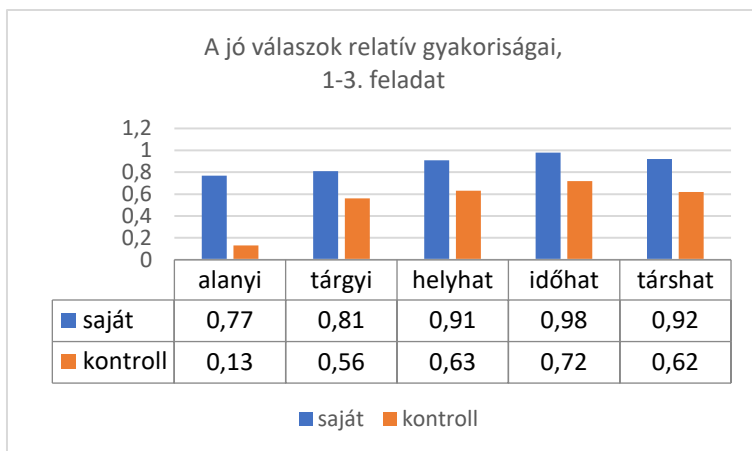
(ii) The measurements at the end of the semester focused on the knowledge of the differences between the information structure of the two languages, how consciously do the students use the rules. In the first two exercises the students had to answer leading questions, and the third exercise was translation but only for the intermediate group. With the fourth exercise (reading comprehension), I measured how much information structure incorporated into the students' competence.

In this measurement 33 students participated from my own groups (10 beginner and 23 intermediate) while the control group consisted of 29 participants (6 beginner and 23 intermediate). In the measurement of the second year's repeated experiment, the beginner group had three exercises, in the first two exercises they were answering leading questions based on given information. The third exercise was reading comprehension. There were no translation exercise as it would have been too advanced for this level. The exercises were identical to the previous measurement.

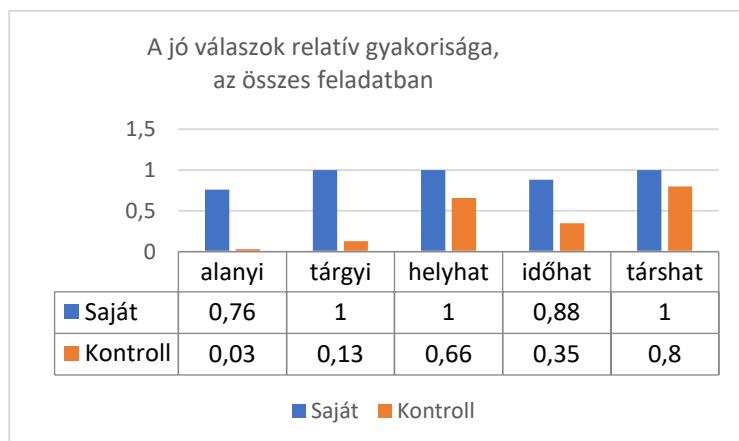
(iii) As a conclusion of the experiment, I organized a discussion with a focus group. In one of the groups the participants were students who learned about information structure and word order rules. The other group consisted of students who studied with the traditional method – lacking instruction on information structure. The discussion

was held in informal setting and I recorded them. Besides question and answer exercises, they had paired or group exercises. Hungarian was the mother tongue of every participant in the groups. No one learned Hungarian word order rules in high school, in their grammar classes they focused on sentence structure analysis. They claimed that Hungarian signals meaning difference with prosody.

The measurements were statistically analyzed. The results show a statistically significant difference between my own groups and the control groups. In my analysis, I conducted statistical hypothesis analysis and independent analysis. I ran Xi square tests for the independent analysis. It showed that with every type of focus construction there is a correlation between the group and its achievement. Students who received instruction on information structure and word order rules achieved significantly better results on the end of semester measurement. The importance of raising awareness of the subject focus and its grammatical position was supported by the results. This was the biggest difference between the test and the control groups. Object focus is hard for the students when there are more adverbials in the sentence as well – e.g. if there is an accusative and a dative argument. In this case the order of the arguments show whether focus is marked (narrow – NP) or unmarked (wide – VP). With respect to adverbial foci there is a smaller difference between the test and the control groups.



1.figure: Relative frequency of correct answers in the first measurement.



2.figure: Relative frequency of correct answers in the beginner group of the second measurement.

If chi-square test give a p value that is smaller than 0.05, the results are not independent of the groups of students.

Across all focus construction types the p value is $p < 0.0001$. This means that the result is significant even in the beginner group, if they learnt about information structure and word order rules. The p values for every focus construction is as follows:

Type of focus construction:	P VALUE:
Subject focus	$p < 0,0001$
Object focus	$p = 0,0003$
Time adverbial focus	$p = 0,015$
Place adverbial focus	$p = 0,21$
Commitative adverbial focus	$p = 0,79$

1.table: P-values by focus types – second measurement

If we take the results of the focus types – subject, object, and time adverbial focus – together, it can be seen that it significantly influenced the achievement of the students whether they have been consciously taught about information structure and whether they know the basic word order rules of Spanish. In the case of place adverbial focus and commitative adverbial focus the results show no significant difference between the two groups.

In the last part of the chapter I discuss the conversations with the focus group. The opinions of the students were in line with the results of the experiment. The participants unanimously supported the integration of word order rules into language classes. The participants of the experiment achieved a higher score on the exercises related to information structure.

The most important findings of the experiment:

- Conscious instruction of the syntactic position of structural focus improves the Spanish learners communicational skills and grammatical competence.
- The notion of topic and focus and their syntactic position can be taught at a beginner level.
- Connecting to the previous finding, the results of the experiment show that language transfer is gradual rather than modular. If a given parameter is connected to several surface structural rule, than the acquisition of the parameter can be different in time.
- Integrating the word order rules of subject focus into Spanish classes yields in significantly better results in all levels compared to the control groups.
- In the study material developed by me, the grammatical-syntactic instruction was held in Hungarian with explicit explanations and contrastive examples. During the experiment I found that explicit explanations help in rewriting the parameters.
- When acquiring the second foreign language (L3) both the mother tongue and the first second language (L2) influences the learning process. If the students know a rule that they learned for L2, they will use the rule for L3. If they encounter a new phenomenon and do not have a previously learned rule from L2 and they do not get explicit instruction about it in L3, their mother tongue will automatically influence L3.

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